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by syviki

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Summary: In another story, Murasaki's the best graduate of Facultas, Ratio is a doctor in search of a cure, and Art receives help on a case from a man with brown hair and three bandages — a man said to work with Mao. (Different meetings lead to different relationships. And what these all lead to?) / AU, very eventual Nice/Art

1. 01

_Well! Enough has been published now that final re-branding may be done without "this hasn't appeared yet" spoiler-syndrome.

>

_This began as a Nice/Art fic, and still is because I promised so. If you're not interested, don't worry, they're idiots so it's very eventual. The fic is more to do with character exploration __—
much more._

_(original thanks go to naite__[naitenaitenaitenaite at tumblr]__, for dealing with my initial mistakes and getting me into this dumb show.)_

* * *

><p>Every day, at 5 PM, Security begins making its first evening rounds within the Prefectural Police Headquarters. The rounds are like clockwork; they begin exactly on time, follow random routes exactly generated the minute before by an algorithm drawing numbers from a server that uses the true randomness of atomic decay, and Art knows that — once the second hand passes twelve — there is an hour's window in which a guard will peer through his open doorway, perhaps stop and greet him, before heading off again.</p>

Art doesn't expect the knock on his door at 5:38 PM. The only people who knocked on Superintendent Art's open door were those in their

first two weeks. Their newest recruit was already well past four.

"Come in," he calls, there's a few soft footfalls â€“ by the time Art looks up, they're already in front of him.

His visitor is a man in a jumpsuit that was once blue, though any blues that remained were now washed to pale gray. There's a smile on his face, under a hat and fuzzy brown hair. A brown cardboard box the size of a toaster is tucked in one arm, and a clipboard held in the other.

"Delivery," says the stranger.

Art realises he's staring at the three very distinctive bandages on the person's face and blinks when the parcel is placed before him.

"Strange," says Art. "I'm not expecting anything."

The shrug he receives only draws his attention to the cord of an earphone snaking up beneath the jumpsuit and tugging at the stranger's ear. There aren't any logos on the clothing, nor are there any stickers of any sort on the parcel. It's completely plain.

The glint of a watch on the stranger's left wrist is tucked into memory. Art assesses with one glance. His expression doesn't change.

"How did you get in here?" asks Art.

The stranger's smile shifts. Like he knows just as well as Art does that any and all deliveries are handled internally after being dropped off at the front desk, and like the stranger can see through solid wood to where Art is slowly feeling for the alarm beneath the table.

Art's question is ignored.

"The serial bomber you've been hunting left something behind yesterday," says the stranger. He turns to the door, pulls his hat down, and tilts his head in such a way that mysterious blue eyes demand all attention. "I'll be back next week for my tip. Enjoy your evidence, Superintendent."

The stranger is already out the door when Art presses the alarm. By the time Art reaches the doorway, arms locked in position for the pistol in his hands, they're already gone.

* * *

><p>"So he knew," says Gasquet, hawk eye narrowing sharply as if it could hone in on its prey.</p>

Art nodded. "About the serial bomber, yes. Even though nobody outside our team should know about yesterday."

It's only the two of them outside one of the laboratories, and the hour hand on their watches are creeping ever closer to the ten. Both men would have been home by now, resting; yesterday, after weeks of

relentless investigation, they'd miraculously had a breakthrough in cracking the serial bomber's plans. Relief at finding the bomb before it detonated had quickly transformed into panic at the hyper-sensitive light and shock sensors, a countdown timer counting hours as if they were seconds and a bomb squad stationed too far away.

It was only because of Art's custom night vision goggles, Gasquet's trusty Swiss blades, the fact that Art was barely able to fit beneath the vehicle and the systematic instructions in his ear that no new lives had been taken.

The team had congratulated Art for resourcefulness and foresight. Art had smiled, didn't mention that he always carried the goggles on him. Made notes in the corner of his brain to study bomb disarmament too some time in the future.

If he'd known, he wouldn't have needed to send the stranger's package to the team assigned on standby, to make sure it was safe before opening.

Gasquet _hmms_.

"Three bandages, you say?"

"Male," says Art, like he's reciting. "Fair, slightly tanned. Height approximately 180cm. Brown hair, blue eyes. Distinctive features: a bandage on either cheek and another across his nose. Likely right-handedâ€"

"â€"because he's got a watch on his left wrist. Right," says Gasquet. "Keep thinking. Do you remember anything else, maybe a Minimum?"

Art's already formed his reply of No, I wish I did, as the question is predictable. After all, the two of them haven't been talking about much else for the past few hours when the only thing on their minds is bringing the serial bomber to justice, especially after the delivery of evidence implied to be more than tossed crumbs.

"He has to be a Minimum Holder," says Art instead, knowing well he's repeating a topic they'd talked about around an hour ago â€" but somehow hoping they'll get someplace this time. "The corridor is straight for dozens of metres on both sides and there is no way an ordinary human would vanish so quickly."

"S'not invisibility or sight-distortion. Thermal scans were negative and all exits were locked instantly on the alarm."

"Except the windows."

"The cameras outside saw no-one leave."

"Then instant movement." Art gestures to the blurry figure in the single freeze-frame they'd found whilst combing the feeds, from one of the corridors on the path to his office. They'd found it two hours ago.

Gasquet shrugs â€" and for some reason, Art stares. There's something about the slight roll of the head, the slight tilt of the shoulders,

and the movement of the mouth and brow that reminds him ofâ€"

The sudden intensity in Art's gaze doesn't go unnoticed.

"You onto something?" says Gasquet.

Art tries not to blink, in case he'd miss it once more. "Do that again."

Gasquet does. This time there's an extra hint of *laissez-faire*, a special laxness that comes with releasing the reins and letting the creature of chance choose its own course. Art doesn't see anything again until he blinks, involuntarily, and when his eyes open there's an after-image of shadow directly beneath Gasquet's right earâ€"

"Earphones."

"Voice?" prompts Gasquet, without pause. "Music? Radio?"

Art shakes his head. "I couldn't hear anything. But he wore a single earphone from under his clothes and up to his right ear. Black, probably to be hidden by his hair."

"Three bandages," mutters Gasquet. "Brown hair, blue eyes. An earphoneâ€!"

Whatever else he may have wanted to say is cut off by the door opening beside them. A technician steps out. There's a strange lump of purple on her lab coat.

"All clear, sirs," she says. They exchange pleasantries; Sorry for the wait. It's no problem. Better to be safe.

Art enters the room behind her, Gasquet half a pace behind. The parcel sits alone atop an empty table to the side; it's closed as if it were never opened, though the tape keeping it shut has been sliced apart by a sharp blade. The rest of the room is busy as equipment is cleared up and put away.

They reach the parcel. Art glances at Gasquet, who nods, and soon the lid is prised open.

The box is empty save for two things.

Art points at the mess of purple gloop sitting in a plastic container, which is in turn atop a crude catapult-like device from which hangs an elastic string. "Whatâ€! is that?"

"â€|Jelly," replies the technician. "Grape flavouring."

Art blinks once. Twice. Realises with no small confusion that the purple substance, the *grape jelly*, is the root cause of the hours-long delay. No doubt they would have had to test it thoroughly for any suspicious or organic materials.

Whilst pulling on a pair of gloves, Gasquet huffs a few private chuckles.

"Besides that smooth jelly," says Gasquet, reaching down and picking

up the second item by its lanyard, "we have this."

The stopwatch spins, reflecting the light. One rotation, two rotation, three rotations, four.

That's when Art sees them.

"Fingerprints," he breathes.

Tomorrow, if the stopwatch checked out as legitimate, when they received the fingerprint data and matched it against all the other evidence they had in their possession, the case would be as good as done.

* * *

><p>The lobby of the Prefectural Police Headquarters is empty so late at night, save the few guards on security. Art and Gasquet nod at them respectfully when they step out of the lifts and onto the ground floor.</p>

"The winds are in our favour," says Gasquet, suddenly. Neither had spoken since handing out thanks for the technicians' work.

Art glances across. "Mr. Gasquet?"

"Have you paid him yet? For the delivery?"

"I meet him next weekâ€|" A spark; Art feels the chase after answers nearing its end, and his index finger curls in anticipation. "You know who he is, Mr. Gasquet?"

Gasquet nods. "You know the broker Mao?"

"You've mentioned, yes. That's him?"

"No â€" he's the guy who started working with him. Some say two, some say five years ago."

"As aâ€| team?"

"Apparently so. Mao is the best â€" so good, he has to be a Holder. To hear he's working with someone elseâ€| well, you can imagine."

(_Art couldn't._)

"Who is he, then?" asks Art, because he's only ever met the stranger, so that's all he really knows about this supposed duo â€" the stranger who'd appeared, handed over a parcel with potentially critical evidence, and even included a small prank should he have opened it immediately.

The mysterious stranger with three bandages, a gaze of sharpest blue, and who knew the food Art liked to eat but hadn't bought since the serial bombing case began.

Gasquet shrugs, so much like the stranger again that Art sees two in his partner's shadow.

"They call him Feng, the Wind." is the reply. "There one minute â€“ the next, gone."

* * *

><p>01: the wind rises

/TBC/

2. 02

_if you would like them, cross-post links can be found on my profile! Additionally, you can find a link there to my twitter (_syviki), where I post micro-status updates for any additional chapters. ((but i'm getting ahead of myself now c':))_

Thanks for reading on~ c:

* * *

><p>"I'm home."<p>

There's a clang, and then a head appears in the doorway leading to the kitchen. "Welcome back!"

Nice, apron around his waist and normally unruly hair held back by both bright headphones and a clamp behind his head, grins at Hajime as she passes by. He's ignored; Hajime shuffles to the windows on the opposite end of the apartment and tugs the shutters open. She gives the news channel playing on the TV a lazy glance, then walks over to place her gloves atop the armrest of the single lounge chair in the corner with intent on reserving it as hers.

A pot whistles. Nice goes back to the small stove, removes the lid of the pot, and peers inside.

Hajime's presence joins him. Nice senses how the sound waves from her steps interacts with the music in his ears. She's chosen the red fox slippers today.

"You're later than usual," he says, giving the pot a stir. "How'd it go?"

Hajime sniffs. "You burnt the bottom of the curry again."

* * *

><p>02: what lies don't know

* * *

><p>Two bowls sit at the low table, atop plastic placemats adorned with yellow tiger designs. Once, they each held white rice and a generous helping of curry.<p>

Now, not a single grain of rice remains. Save the golden track-marks left behind from spoons scraping sauce off the sides, they're both absolutely empty.

"Okay," says Hajime.

[_Okayâ€| ? _]

Nice deadpans. "I spend ages working on this, it's not entirely black, and all you have to say is just 'okay'? No 'thanks for the meal' or _anything?_"

"You burnt the curry," is the reply, like it's an explanation.

"It's _not_ an explanation!"

Nice tries to put on his headphones, but his fingers get caught in the clamp still in his hair.

[_Attempt unsuccessful. Plan B: Start. _]

The clamp is yanked off ungratefully, then thrown. Hajime tilts to the side; it soars past her head, hits the wall across the room, bounces off, and lands wedged behind the stand below the TV.

"I'm not helping you get that." Hajime rises to her feet. "Thanks for the meal."

[_Do you wish to resign? (Y / N)_]

[_ â€| _]

Wordlessly, Nice pushes his bowl aside and rests the side of his head atop the table. He's still able to see Hajime take a few steps to the side and watches her stretch after the meal. The late-afternoon sun filters light through the shutters beside her, illuminating her clothes and skin in a staggered, golden glow.

Nice stares at the scar on the back of her leg. Nearly twenty centimetres of ridges carve shadows into her left shin.

Minutes pass where only the TV speaks in the background, but neither of them are listening.

"How was it?" says Nice.

Hajime rolls her shoulders. Shrugs.

"Alright." She reaches for her pocket for a folded piece of paper. "I got the agreement from her."

[_'Her': The landlord._]

"She hasn't noticed that the rent in this area will rise around next week?"

Hajime gives him a look. It says, _remember who you are._

Nice opens his mouth, changes his mind, then closes it again. He opens the receipt and skims through the details.

"That's our next three months covered, then," he muses. "Good thing we don't have any loansâ€| "

There's no reply. Hajime acts like she hasn't heard him and takes a seat on the lounge. At that moment, a sudden burst of colour on the TV's screen draws their attention.

Snap. The world warps: Nice _moves_; he's activated his Minimum to reach the remote beside her and turned the volume up instantly.

"â€"Breaking news,_" says the newscaster. "_Yokohama police have arrested a suspect they believe is responsible for the serial bombings that began six weeks ago and has since taken countless lives. This comes as a result of an anonymous tip sent to the force the day before yesterday. A spokesperson for the police has said that_â€"

The screen shows footage of a broad-shouldered person being hustled into a police car, face buried in a jacket to avoid being seen. In the background, one of Yokohama Chinatown's great_paifang_ gates is blocked off by a line of police; between it and the car, a young man with white-lavender hair is talking to another officer on the scene.

Hajime doesn't miss the way Nice's eyes soften and his smile creeps wider. Nor how Nice doesn't stop looking at the man.

[_Youâ€|_]

"Well," says Nice, after the screen changes, "I'm suppose I'm off, then."

Hajime doesn't respond. Nice doesn't wait for an answer, collecting the dishes and hopping to the kitchen. The bowls and spoons clatter as they land in the sink. Water rushes for them to soak; it's switched off some seconds later, and then Nice emerges â€" apronless â€" to swap his headphones for a pair of non-descript earphones instead.

"I tried making _onigiri_ today, they're in the fridge if you get hungry," says Nice. He's pulling on his shoes, grabs his keys.
"Thanks for everything, Hajime. Be back later!"

Snap; he's gone. The front door closes behind his shadow.

Hajime turns the TV off and pulls her knees to her chest. She tries to quash the quivering in her stomach, nervousness that had begun ever since Nice had laid eyes on the charming Superintendent Art moments ago.

[_Nice, Iâ€| _]

Her stomach snarls.

"Don't thank me, Nice," she mutters to herself, then pauses. "â€|If I eat your onigiri, I might die."

* * *

><p>It feels like there are media personnel on every inch of the sidewalk. Reporters, photographers, cameramen with an unblinking third fish's eye, and boom operators with a second head hanging off a

neck attached to their arms. Among others Art could not pick out of the crowd in order to name.<p>

"This's turned into a circus."

Art ignores the media with the ease that comes with practice, inclined to agree. He makes a note to investigate if they have a source in the police department; such a turnout is abnormal.

He glances toward Gasquet approaching him from afar. "It does resemble it a bit, doesn't it?"

"Hardly. I'd say it's more than 'a bit'." Gasquet swaps the eye he keeps closed so that he can look at Art directly. "How is the search going?"

"Negative. Looks like the area's safe and clean. The last of the bomb squad should be retreating now â€“ we can get these roads unblocked and the city moving again."

Art has some amount of regret for the financial cost of evacuating such a dense area, especially since they're outside of Yokohama Chinatown. Hopefully there's no lasting damage done to its reputation. Better to be safe than sorry.

Or so he tells himself, anyway, and will tell the press conference being held later.

It's the best decision to take (for a person with no Minimum).

The media are leaving now. Equipment's being swallowed by the trunks of cars or sealed within the backs of vans. There are a few people still remaining, lurking, closing up their stories or searching for anything left to do.

"Mr. Gasquet?" asks Art, once he's certain that there is nothing left for him to oversee. Already, the public are slowly returning to their everyday lives, trickling back into the area.

"Hm?"

"This Fengâ€¦ how would I find him?"

It almost looks like Gasquet tenses. By the time Art turns so he can see the older man directly instead of out the corner of his eye, it's gone. Art chalks the action to the movement of the last police car having driven past his partner on its way to the station.

His imagination must have combined the two.

"No clue," says Gasquet. "He's like a shadow. Maybe you could try asking Mao."

"Mao?"

"Brown hair, average build, oriental features. Wears a pair of small, dark spectacles. He's usually dressed in dark green Chinese-cut clothes and probably eating."

Art begins searching on reflex, not entirely sure why, and

immediately spots a person beneath the paifang gate leading into Chinatown — a person that happens to match Gasquet's description exactly.

"Like him?"

Gasquet pauses mid-stride.

"That's him."

Mao, chewing considerably on a bun, is watching them so intently that Art wonders how they didn't notice him before. No; upon second glance, his stare is entirely for Gasquet.

When Gasquet starts walking toward him, Mao turns the corner and disappears deep into Chinatown. Art follows despite having lost sight of the man the instant he joined the crowds; fortunately, Gasquet knows where he's going, so it's some several turns later through streets surrounded with red and gold that the two end up facing Mao again.

This time, they're on two sides of a vendor's food cart. And, unlike a normal vendor, Mao isn't smiling.

"Here you are, Art," says Gasquet. He turns to Mao. "I'd like a steamed bun, please."

Mao lifts the lid of the steamer beside him. Two buns are inside.

"That will be—"

He's cut off by the roll of notes presented to him. Most are covered by Gasquet's hand to prevent people in the street from seeing. Except Art, who can read the denomination of the outermost note because of where he stands.

Ten thousand yen.

"I have an outstanding fee," says Gasquet. "Please, keep the change."

Mao stares at Gasquet, even as the steamer continues puffing precious warm air outside its confines. Finally, he takes the money and performs the trade. Art wonders what the fee had been for, then dismisses the thought instantly. Gasquet's business is nothing he needs to know.

The farewell exchanged between them when Gasquet excuses himself is brisk. As soon as the man leaves, Art doesn't expect it when a steamed bun is suddenly held toward him.

There's a piece of paper hidden under the bun. Mao's eyes glitter, hinting to knowledge unknown.

"And one for you, sir?"

Art pauses for a moment, then reaches inside his jacket for his wallet. Somehow he knows it's information that won't be worth coins.
"How much?"

"Don't worry about the cost," is the reply. "Especially not after that. Please, take it, it's rightfully yours."

Only for a second, there's hesitation. Art takes it anyway.

"Thank you very much," says Art.

Mao inclines his head. There's a faint hint of a secret smile. "I look forward to meeting you again."

* * *

><p>There's only one line of text in the note: the address to his apartment, and a time.</p>

4:17 PM.

Art glances at his watch as he waits for the elevator to return to the ground floor. The minute hand is past the seven; it's nearing five. He's half-contemplating if he should take the stairs when the elevator's doors open, beckoning entry in sheepish apology.

When he finally reaches his apartment, nobody is there.

Art isn't sure if the sense of unease in the back of his head is because he'd been expecting someone (Feng) or if it were because of something elseâ€"

â€"That is, not until his instincts scream DOWN! â€" and he narrowly avoids death by a blade.

Art doesn't pause to look up; he instantly follows through with a roll to create distance, and by the time he's risen to his feet his pistol is already in his hands and his thumb is against the safety. Only then does he take a look at his assailant: a woman whose features are hidden by a ski mask, descending from the air vent and holding a knife raised to her lip.

No; on second glance, there's no cable. She's descending upon her own power. Art looks at the knife again, and realises it's a silver letter opener.

She smiles, bites down on the edge of the letter opener, then throws it at him. It flies with frightening accuracy, the air in the hallway shivers as if to propel it along, and then the Minimum guided projectile crashes into Art's pistol faster than he can blink. The shock of the collision force Art's elbows to unlock and drives the pistol flying backwards and upwards.

Art is only barely able to keep his grip, and stumbles half a step backwards from the excess energy. A closer look at the firearm reveals the letter opener had wedged itself tightly down the length of the barrel; silver exits plastic polymer directly before the chamber. The handle protrudes from the end of the muzzle.

Both damaged and blocked, the pistol would be dangerous to fire.

"Took you long enough to come home, Mr. Superintendent," says the

woman. A second letter opener spins above an open palm. "Now _die!_"

* * *

><p>TBC/**

3. 03

(nb. some parts in this chapter have been highly tagged for revision; there is no impact beyond improving factual accuracy)

* * *

><p>Art is no stranger to death threats, and he never will be.<p>

As the only student to graduate from Facultas with no Minimum, as the youngest Superintendent in Yokohama's history due to his graduation, and as the head of a criminal investigative division responsible for one of the biggest cities in Japanâ€"he's faced at least one death threat a year for at least a decade.

But with his pistol disabled by an attack from a masked woman capable of firing long-range projectiles in the time it takes to blink, the Minimum Holder twirling the silver letter opener may have a real chance at carrying out his murder.

The hallways are shaped like an L, the exits only on one branch. Art had been past the point where both branches connect when he'd been forced to dodge; now he's trapped in the other end.

With the woman standing in the corner and nothing but smooth walls and apartment doors behind him, he's a single target down a straight shooting range to be fired upon at leisure.

This time, when the woman bites the silver, Art sees the snaggletooth scraping along the blade. Her trigger. It's only from years of living in a world where everybody has a Minimum and Art alone makes up the minority, that he can concentrate and focus on how activations affect the very matter of the universe: the pulsing exchange renders as bright light and colour in the back of his eyes; the thresholds of this is possible and this is not interleave, painting a picture of their own reality.

The Minimum Factor.

Art tosses his useless pistol away. He watches the location of her eyes and concentrates on the patterns of colour to determine the optimum timing.

By the time the letter opener is thrown, Art is already moving.

The blade will reach him in one second; fall aside in half, let it pass â€" follow through. He has a flashbang in his pocket, a stun grenade that lets off a burst of bright light and loud sound for disorientation. Extremely effective in small, enclosed spaces, such as rooms and hallways. If he uses it in such close proximity he'll be caught in its effects, but all he needs is an opportunity to get close and disable her from taking any action. Any damage inflicted to

him in the process would be negligible compared to the alternative.

Art doesn't get a chance to use it when the woman is suddenly kicked aside by a blur. At the same time, the door to the apartment beside her opens â€"

"Heyâ€" "

Art's apartment.

â€" and then there's a flash of brown, a loud yelp when the person in the doorway collides into the woman who'd been trying to take Art's life â€"

And all is still.

Art stares at Feng, the woman lying atop him, and the young girl in a blue hooded jacket with one foot atop the pile of bodies in the doorway. Like it's all a divine joke, and it's up to Art to deliver the punchline.

The thought is gone as quickly as it arrives. Art's professionalism returns, and he reaches in his pocket for the flashbang because the threat isn't over. Only changed.

The girl moves fast. And if his previous disappearance is any indication, Feng does too. If worst comes to worst, and Feng's also an enemy, taking both down will not be easy. But, Feng's trapped beneath a body (for now) and the girl, a red glove on either hand and heavy boots on her feet, looked (looked) to be purely limited within close-rangeâ€"

It's lazily when the girl steps aside and turns her arms out to signify disinterest in further aggression.

"Not hungry," she mumbles, barely audible.

Art makes a choice. He approaches.

His assailant is unconscious. Art handcuffs her as a precaution nonetheless. The next thing would be to call the police, take measures so that she wouldn't be able to open her mouth â€" and thus activate her Minimum â€" if she were to come to, and to frisk her for any dangerous possessions whilst he waited for backup to arrive.

"_Aauugh_, " mutters Feng, after Art terminates his phone call. "Ow ow owâ€| _ow._"

Art looks down on him.

"Who are you?" he asks.

"I'm Nice."

Feng's grin suggests he's just told the funniest joke in the world. Art's not so impressed. He searches his pocket for the slip of paper Mao had given him. It's unfolded, then shown to the other man.

"Do you have any knowledge of this, Feng?"

"No, really, I'm Nice," is the reply. "Call me Nice. That's my name."

Nice.

Art pauses. "â€|Facultas?"

There's an edge beneath those stupid bandages and laughing eyes that Art wonders about. The name doesn't quite suit him.

"Why not?" A non-answer.

(_Then again, 'Art' never really suited himself either._)

"Could you answer me?" says Art. "Why does this say a time and a location that would have led to my death?"

The smile on Nice's face evaporates.

"You must have asked him where I was," says Nice. "While it's true I thought I'd be here at 4:17, that was only my projected time of arrival. Actually, I got here at 4:21, because the lights next to the Sweets&Treats Bakery are malfunctioningâ€"

Plastic crinkles out of sight. Art's eyes flash as if they could see behind him without his head needing to move. He shouldn't look away from a suspect, but Nice is being so â€" well, _nice_ â€" that Art hesitates.

Nice stares up at him and maintains their gaze.

"â€|I heard about her when I was investigating, so I came to stop her before she could get you," he says. "Harm to you is the last thing I have in mind."

"Too salty."

The comment comes from nowhere; both Nice and Art blink in unison, then turn toward the girl. She's chewing considerably on an onigiri buried within plastic wrap, the rest of which forms a waterfall spilling over the rest of her fingers, and she's staring at Nice as if he's some sort of bug that requires squishing.

"_Hajiiimeeee,_" says Nice, "onigiri are _better_ with salt."

The girl, Hajime, swallows and takes another bite as if expecting the second would taste different from the first.

"â€|Too salty."

Art doesn't smile at the exchange, but his eyes do soften alongside a faint upturning of his mouth. Nice speaks with such sincerity that he had to be telling the truth â€" or be a brilliant liar. Either way, Art recognises the help he'd been given for the serial bombing case, and there's no reason to continue the stand-off any further.

Art slowly rolls the woman off Nice. It cements his decision.

"_Finally_," says Nice. He sits up and starts rubbing his back. "Hey, Art, what do you think?"

"â€|Pardon?"

"If onigiri is better with salt or not."

Before Art even has the chance to think about the question, a lock clatters behind them. Art pauses mid-frisk, knelt over the woman lying flat on the ground, and places the three letter openers he'd found to one side. He turns; his neighbour's door opens.

The Sato family's middle son tentatively peers into the hallway.

Art has always made an effort to introduce himself to his neighbours, learn about who they were, what they did, and remain on good terms. He's about to apologise for the commotion, but Sato pales before he can. The door shakes like he's fighting to keep it open.

"Aa," says the girl, Hajime. She's glancing at Sato from the corner of her eye; then, like a puppet with body parts suspended by strings, she swivels around. "There he is. Time to go to work."

Hajime walks the ten-or-so steps to Sato's door. Sato, so tall he nearly brushes the doorframe, whom Art knows as a respectable man that's recently been made head of a small family business down the road, cowers every time she moves closer.

"P-p-please don'tâ€"don't make a fuss," says Sato.

His eyes flicker nervously up and down the hallway, hovering on Nice and lingering on Art.

Hajime stops in front of the door and takes another bite from the onigiri. "You have one minute."

"Please! Just one more week â€" the bakery is doing well, now. I'll have itâ€"all of itâ€"" Sato glances at Art again, then makes gesturing motions to Hajime, "â€"by next week."

"â€|Thirty seconds."

"Iâ€" I can give you half. Justâ€| don't make a fuss about it."

"Ten seconds." Hajime paused, then sniffed the air.

"Pastryâ€|?"

Sato blinks. "Yes? Ah, that is to say â€" yes, I'm making some now. Practicing. Is there somethingâ€|?"

"â€|President Okura said half is acceptable. Give me your pastryâ€| I won't leave anything today."

Relief spreads from wide eyes to an unconscious smile. Sato bows readily, calls "_Thank you very much!_", then rushes inside.

Art knows the Sato's middle son as a respectable man, recently been made head of their small family business, the Sweets&Treats Bakery.

"After the eldest son committed suicide, having lived a life of bad habits, too burdened by countless loans.

It had been pure chance that Art had discovered the scene and developed a personal interest in the case. It's also the reason the Sato family had discovered directly that their neighbour Art is not just an officer but the Superintendent himself as opposed to just hearing of him from rumour or the media. The nervous glances make sense now: to be shamed about an active debt is hard enough for the Japanese, but to be shamed in front of the Superintendent?

Art can't imagine.

(It's strange to think such a young girl works for a loan shark, one ruthless enough to threaten the family of the deceased, of the type Art thought was phased out years ago.)

"Man, that Hajime," mutters Nice. "Always so easily bribed."

Hajime finishes the onigiri and wipes her mouth with her fingers. "Be less salty. Oh " pastry's here."

When Sato returns a second later, Art turns away to give them some modicum of privacy and returns to what he'd been doing. Another letter opener is confiscated from his assailant's ankle. It's not real privacy, but Art can only hope it helps.

Once the frisk is finished, Art's about to retrieve some tape when a roll is suddenly thrust in front of him. He looks up at Nice, who's smiling; from his position, Art finally notices the bright sneakers and the jacket vest the man is wearing, colours so vibrant compared to the pale blue jumpsuit he'd worn before.

Art looks back down. He pulls the ski mask off his assailant's head, freeing youthful features and short red hair. A strip of tape ensures she can't use her Minimum.

Art returns to his feet. He knows her.

Something nudges his arm.

"Here," says Hajime, around a custard pastry in her mouth. One hand is carrying a paper bag. The other holds out the pistol Art had discarded earlier.

Art takes it " it's a little difficult to figure out how to hold, when the slide is damaged by the letter opener still wedged tight and the grip is sticky with sugar. He makes sure the safety is on.

"Thank you," says Art.

Hajime leaves without acknowledgement, and then she's gone. Sato, who had quietly been watching her leave, promptly bows toward Art and Nice before slamming the door shut with a bit more force than necessary.

"Chinen Ayami."

Art looks at Nice, who'd spoken as soon as the tumblers in Sato's lock fall into position. "You know her?"

Nice nudges the woman's shoulder with the toe of his shoe.

"As much as you," he says. "Investigation only. Perhaps a little more. She's the fianc e of Tachikawa Kenta — or, as you know him, Yokohama's very-recently arrested serial bomber."

"Nothing we had suggested she was a Minimum Holder," says Art.

"Not only a Minimum Holder," is the reply. "Her Minimum exactly matches Green's. Isn't it funny? Two Metal-Force Minimums in the same city! if Green hadn't been killed two months ago as part of that string. So now there's only one."

Green — a student who'd graduated from Facultas the year before Art. Art had spent more time at the crime scene than he'd ever spent around Green whilst the other was still alive. The remains had borne all the hallmarks of the Minimum Holder serial killer, still unsolved.

Missing brain. Demeaning circumstances. Unnecessarily bloody.

No leads.

"You shouldn't know about that," says Art.

"Give us more credit. Mao is amazing."

Nice starts playing with the roll of tape he still holds. Art looks into his apartment; he knows, without asking, that it's the tape he keeps atop his side table.

"I suppose he told you and her where I live too, then," says Art.

"Me, yes. But—" The tape stills. Nice's expression turns thoughtful. "She knew it was going to happen. Yesterday."

"What was?"

"Tachikawa's arrest," says Nice. "It was yesterday when she'd decided to come here and kill you, though you'd think the more rational decision would be to try and save him. There are no police connections in her background to explain how she knew about the arrest or where you lived—which reminds me," he adds, quickly, "lock your windows. Always. It's a pretty careless habit you have there, Superintendent."

Art makes a note to do so. "How many information brokers are in this city?"

"Several. Most just run consumer data mining," is the reply. "I'd wager only two know where you live, at this current time — myself and Mao. And I know for a fact that Mao didn't do it."

"You have very high confidence in him."

"Mao won't say anything that could kill you."

A sincere smile beneath blue eyes. "Harm to you is the last thing I have in mind."

The knowledge is filed away into the corner of Art's brain. Along with a possible conclusion that Mao's generosity had purely been upon Nice's request rather than a decision of his own choosing.

"I'm being asked to check my people, then?" Art says instead.

"Do what you'd like," says Nice. "It was fun meeting you, but I have work to get back to. Otherwise, Mao will eat all the fried cutlet sandwiches and then Hajime will complain I didn't bring any back."

Art's reminded of the roll of notes Gasquet had given Mao, and the man asking if Art had paid.

"Thank you for all your assistance," says Art. "How may I return the favour?"

Nice shrugs. "Save it. I'm not gonna hold debts above the head of someone who constantly puts themselves on the line for everyone else. Althoughâ€œ!" Nice pauses, adjusting his earphones. "You're thinking of investigating President Okura's business, aren't you? If you could put that off, it'd be great. Mao's nice but stingy as hell and Hajime's really our only source of income."

"There are other occupationsâ€œ"

"Not for two kids who quit Facultas."

Art doesn't reply at first, silently considering all the information he's learnt. For someone who's an information broker, Nice is being loose with his words; at this point, not saying anything would be more valuable than any money he could give them in return.

"After the serial murderer case, I make no promises," says Art.

Nice laughs. He puts one hand in his pocket and tosses the tape aside. "I knew you were interesting."

There's a loud snap, and Nice is gone before the roll of tape hits the floor.

* * *

><p>Nice's escape is literally just in time, because as soon as he reaches the emergency stairs the police backup Art had called is already in the building. Nice'd said a little more than he'd thought he would, and left a little later, but he's still safe and alive and hey! All his limbs are intact and he's still got both kidneys, so there's not too much of an issue.

When he switches his music back off and begins his descent down the building, he wonders if he should have told Art to check his windows again.

Whatever. Too late now.

Mao's waiting, of course. He's halfway through a sandwich when Nice arrives in the small, dimly-lit alley the majority of his business is conducted within, and doesn't say a word until Nice is bored of kicking up dust and leans against the wall beside him.

Nice didn't need to say anything because Mao already knows.

"His apartment is that bad?" It's a question, but from Mao's mouth it sounds more like a statement of fact.

Nice nods. Chinen Ayami should have been neutralised by the time Art arrived, with either a note left behind or Nice's presence there to explain why. That had been the plan.

Instead, as soon as Nice had entered through the window, he'd frozen from what he'd seen inside.

He knows that Art's been living in that apartment for the last three years. But in those three years, there's nothing personal in those rooms. No books, no television, nothing to hint to a life outside work; only a sparse bed, training equipment, and firearms heavily secured behind a handful of bolts and heavy doors. There's a single fishtank, filled with pebbles and sea shells, but it's empty. Any hope that Art at least had a pet had vanished instantly; it's never been filled with water. It's nothing more than a reflection of the apartment â€“ Art's internal world.

Nice had concluded that Art would have dropped his guard should the man have returned home, so he couldn't let anyone inside. That's why he'd gone to the windows first, to make sure no-one could be waiting.

But Art had no personal effects, and Art hadn't cared.

Nice isn't quite sure what to make of the man that graduated from Facultas solely by iron will. The man who carries night vision goggles everywhere he walks, and is willing to destroy his own hearing with zero hesitation. A Superintendent at once so true in day-to-day affairs but, at the same time, willing to put common justice aside so Hajime could continue earning her pay.

He's obviously thinking too loud, as Mao's quick to hand him a sandwich without looking once in his direction.

"Don't fall too hard, little Nice," says Mao.

"Me?" Nice grabs the sandwich, and takes a bite despite having eaten lunch not long before. He's turning into both of the gluttons he loves. "Please._ I'm not even falling."

* * *

><p>03: bitter, like the darkest coffee

/TBC/

_(it's about time to mention this: many canon liberties have been taken in favour of original and story-specific world-building/explanations, to flesh out the universe some more. if you have questions about any specific choices, don't hesitate to ask!__)

* * *

><p>Over a year ago, Murasaki'd been in the shadows of a great stage.</p>

"â€"the individual graduating with the highest grades in the history of Facultas Academy, Murasaki."

He walks into the light, followed by applause from people trapped in the dark. Standing on the stage is like being examined. The overhead lamps are too intense. His suit suddenly stifles him, jacket too tailored and tie too tight. He's choking. He's blind.

Murasaki smiles politely, accepts the certificate, presents it to the faceless and turns his back on Facultas's instructors sitting to the rear of the stage.

It's to the shadows he returns, not a minute later.

* * *

><p>04: le papillon du chaos

* * *

><p>Graduation from Facultas entails several things: the first, freedom from hellish training and brutal hours; the second, agreement to a strict, no-nonsense restriction upon the use of a person's Minimum in accordance with the Minimum Secrecy Act; and the third, the placement of oneself into some of the most successful companies in Japan.</p>

Scouting and recruitment is a simple process. Companies send job positions to the Academy before every ceremony, occasionally mentioning the names of those they wish the request to go to, and the graduates are given a list from which to choose. Facultas's training has a core curriculum of strenuous physical activity, management, higher mathematics, legalities, psychology, philosophy, world history, communication at a business level in three natural and two computer languagesâ€"all supplemented by specialist education either best suited to the student's Minimum or of their choosing. All graduates have completed the equivalent of at least one formal university degree.

With such a system, there's no need for interviews or presentations to determine suitability.

Murasaki's the top student that year. He gets to pick first. There should be a certain apprehension accompanying the decision, since placement is done through back channels; graduation from a facility so secretive means second chances may not as well exist. Whatever he chooses will most likely be the job he retains for the rest of his life.

He can't bring himself to care.

He's accompanied by a distinct lack of passion as he leafs through the offers, scanning character after character after character. None resonate with his soul. Despite being first, only one offer requests him specifically. He's not surprised — considering his speciality.

We want you because you are the top student, it says, in many more words that ultimately mean the same thing. Fukui Holdings wants to expand its investments within Europe. Your specialist education in fine arts is unimportant to us, since you were the only graduate this year to pick French on top of your English learning.

He's offered assistance and mentoring, first work as a translator, and will be paid to take additional business courses at the same time.

Skim. Flick through the other offers to compare. Murasaki's eyebrows rise.

He'll be paid a lot.

For a man who's been a prodigy for most of his life, in a system designed to churn children into geniuses or break them beyond repair — a man with no real goal in life except to exist —

Money is as good a reason as any.

* * *

><p>Three months ago, Murasaki learnt why Fukui Holdings had been so determined to hire him.</p>

Murasaki's been good at avoiding more social interaction than he needs to indulge. He'd never cared about attaining promotions, or garnering the goodwill of his fellow co-workers, because so long as he's being paid to work he'll continue to complete it efficiently and a fraction beyond satisfactory. Not impressive enough to set any bars, not so little that he's perceived as lazy, but just enough to be considered reliable and worth investing in.

The only nomikai Murasaki'd attended had been the first. He'd lasted all of five minutes at the drinking party after the alcohol made its rounds, cigarettes were broken out, and his co-workers loosened up. After excusing himself, he'd never returned.

Three months ago, he'd received an invitation by email from someone with an email he didn't know, tagged it as junk, and added the sender to his blocked list.

Three months ago, the woman called Momoka visited him in order to ask why.

Murasaki's sure the visit has to have breached all sorts of protocol, but Momoka isn't one of Fukui Holdings' most influential shareholders for nothing. He doesn't find out her position until she drags him out for coffee in a private lounge. Murasaki's more annoyed by how he'd been interrupted translating mid-slide than amazed at the view of Tokyo's skyline, suspended a few hundred metres off the ground and

framed by glass walls to three sides.

She's charming. Well-dressed, in a rich suit. A splash of red accentuates the undertones of her hair.

When he returns, his co-workers will be intolerable.

The aroma of bold coffee fills the space. Momoka smiles. "Your tea was just brewed. I would be surprised if it did anything to insult you so soon."

Apparently, Murasaki is frowning.

"Or perhaps you're examining the reflection?" says Momoka. "I hear fortune telling is back in fashion."

"Ms. Momoka"

"Just Momoka. Please."

Murasaki doesn't indicate he's heard. "Ms. Momoka, may I ask why you've invited me whilst I should be working?"

"Stubborn one, aren't you?"

Murasaki takes a sip. It's good, expensive tea. Nothing he doesn't know already.

"I thought it was well about time I introduced myself to you," says Momoka, "and let you know why you're working for Fukui. You see I asked Wataru if he could bring you in. Make a job offer you'd be a fool to refuse. I like Fukui. I also like you."

"I'm not looking for a relationship," the flat reply.

Her laughter sounds like bells. Perfect, as to be expected of a woman well-refined.

"What a wonderful answer."

For a while, there's silence. Momoka's watching him. Her stare is hypnotic, entrancing at some point, the aroma of coffee'd been replaced by a sweet, flowery perfume.

She blinks, and Murasaki's in the real world again.

"It's always the most interesting people who come out of Facultas," says Momoka. "Tell me as The Prodigy, the best graduate in history why did you choose fine arts as your speciality?"

"I..."

...

Why had he cared enough to begin an answer?

Momoka's smiling at him again. It's equal parts patient and equal parts expecting. Murasaki decides he doesn't like the taste of green tea.

The cup is placed aside. "The sky isn't made of steel."

* * *

><p>He neglects to mention it's a web instead.</p>

* * *

><p>Murasaki'd been shuttled across Fukui's many divisions, someone having decided that he'd apparently learnt enough to begin working on his own. For some reason that means relocating to Yokohama, to the headquarters of one of its subsidiaries.</p>

It's all temporary, he'd been informed. All until their dealings in Europe are stable enough for him to travel and work directly from there.

When Murasaki notices that ninety-five percent of those working on Level Four have only one name, written in knifelike katakana lines, he doesn't bother hoping.

Two weeks later it's as if he'd never been assured.

(Murasaki thinks Momoka'd decided his answer was lacking, or she'd found someone else to keep her entertained.)

"_Monsieur Bernier,_ _À la suite de notre conversation relative à SICAV_â€"

It's nearing five in the afternoon in Japan. According to the digital dashboard on the back wall, it's late morning in the Eurozone and very, very early morning in New York. Murasaki's fortunate his third language is French. He's not forced into the cumbersome hours worked by those covering Wall Street. It's one less concern in a world where money has to flow smoothly through a handful of jurisdictions at the click of a button; a world where currency markets opened and closed at different times of the day. His job can be reduced to doing research and conducting deals in a market halfway around the globe. All for those who knew what they wanted, but couldn't speak the language.

His hours also mean that, of all the Minimum Holders on Level Four, those with the more... distracting conditions for activation aren't present whilst he's there.

Crack. A sheet of candy snaps in half.

Most of them, anyway.

At the desk directly opposite his, Honey grins, entirely unaware of Murasaki's frustration.

"_Get you!_" she says, followed by the obnoxious rattling of keyboard keys.

Honey holds Level Four's record for the fastest typing speed, at nearly two hundred words per minute. Murasaki eyes the tray on her desk, filled with a dozen lollipop sticks.

Analysis Minimum or not, he thinks, she also holds the record for the most annoying sound " made all the more worse by its unpredictability, because her activations are random and never according to any specific time.

He would have scoffed, but he'd seen how she can process thousands of variables from millions of statistics in a single instant, as fast as the most powerful supercomputers in the world. She holds a doctorate in statistics. She's being paid to develop a revolutionary trading algorithm, whilst he, like most of the others on Level Four, performed duties more akin to back office organisation.

Momoka's interest in him or not doesn't matter compared to Honey, Murasaki is expendable.

(A sign on Honey's desk says, "_Call me 'doctor' __and I will skin you._")

Murasaki's call ends. He hangs up, glances over the notes he'd made during his conversation with Francis Bernier, and decides they're adequate enough that he may take a break and continue later.

The manager doesn't even look at him when he leaves. The ideal workplace harmony wa of a floor full of Minimum Holders, all with odd activation conditions and all integral to the success of the company, is nothing near traditional. Coming and going as pleased is not the strangest dynamic on Level Four, but one critical to maintaining self-control.

There's a convenience store in a corner down the road, so Murasaki buys dinner. Two bentos, the second for Honey. With the intensity at which she'd been typing, chances are that she won't remember to eat until midnight. She'd bought lunch for him when he'd forgotten a few days ago.

(He always leaves before her; he's never seen her go home.)

The clerk scans the boxes. Murasaki digs a hand into his pocket for change.

"Say," begins the clerk, suddenly. "Are you lost?"

Murasaki'd expected the comment to be standard convenience store talk, having handed over the exact amount. He glances around, unsure whether the urge is from some sleeping instinct or an uncharacteristic burst of self-consciousness, only to find that he and the clerk are the only people in the store. There are no other customers or even staff to give greetings at the door, despite it being Yokohama at five in the evening.

He recognises the clerk by the faint amount of facial hair at his chin that moves when he speaks. They're both regulars, and should know one another.

"What?" says Murasaki.

"Your eyes. They're tired of the world."

Murasaki opens his mouth to say that no, sorry, he's not remotely interested in anything religious or being preached to on his way out.

He doesn't. A chill creeps out from where the arms of his glasses come into contact with his ears.

The clerk lowers the arm he'd raised. Murasaki has no doubt â€“ it's the effect of a Minimum.

"Did you know that even graduates from Facultas are monitored in their day to day lives?" says the clerk. "You have a tail outside the store that we should be dealing with now. Consider it a gift for taking your time."

"What do you want?"

"To extend an invitation."

"I'm not religious."

"We aren't a religion." Hooded eyes sharpen beneath dark hair. Murasaki wonders how he could have once missed that stare's intensity. "We're a family."

Suddenly the main doors slide open, followed by greetings of "Welcome!"; the world returns to normal. Murasaki's purchase is extended to him.

"Thank you," says the clerk.

He then moves onto his next customer, smiling as if nothing'd occurred. Murasaki watches him.

If Murasaki expects anything else to occur before he reaches the sliding doors, he'll be greatly disappointed.

His return to the office is uneventful. Even if the clerk had been telling the truth, and Murasaki had been followed until now, the trip back is so much the same that he wouldn't have known. Still, as he heads up to Level Four, he resolves to cast the incident from his mind. By the time he's reached his desk the memory is nearly discarded altogether.

â€“Until he opens the plastic bag to find a black business card adorned with a butterfly.

Honey's still typing. She glances up only when Murasaki drops one of the bentos on her desk, lollipop protruding from the corner of her mouth, and nods silently in thanks without looking at what he'd chosen.

After he sits down, Murasaki ignores the logical thought to immediately throw away the business card in favour of his curiosity. _CafÃ© Without._ An address and telephone number are printed neatly in one corner. Struck by impulse, he turns the card over.

It turns out CafÃ© Without's business card is one-sided, with handwritten text on the back.

Freemum is our family.

Call if you ever need help. Ask for me.

You are not alone.

â€“ Ishigami Shunichi._

* * *

><p>TBC/**

5. F2

**Warnings: **This update contains **cw: gore**, **cw: suicide** and **cw: bad attitudes to suicide**. If you want to take no chances, a link to a safe version of this chapter is on my profile. (it's slightly different but still workable)

* * *

><p>â€“

Â« F2 Â»

â€“

* * *

><p>Three goes to Facultas promised redemption, is subjected to study that would leave ordinary men dead countless times, and leaves an empty shell.<p>

"Why?" he asks.

The head researcher is tall, broad-shouldered, with a strong jaw and a receding hairline tucked beneath a surgical cap. He's not the man operating the microscope but the one who orders others to do it for him. The one time he'd stepped into the pit had been at the beginning, when he'd literally taken names; Facultas's seal of ownership, emblazoned on all, noticed only by those made aware. Not even the old combat records from Three's homeland remember the ghost he'd once been.

Three's seen the man many times behind the panel of bulletproof glass on one end of the room. Sometimes watching, sometimes missing, sometimes reading data from an array of screens where there used to be wall.

He's never seen the head researcher pause. "Why what?"

"Why haven't you killed me?"

The head researcher turns to look at him. Three lacks the strength to be insulted by the pity in dark eyes; it's strength he used to have, but not any more.

"That's against the law," the head researcher replies. As if human experimentation is not. "Sorry."

Three bows.

"I apologise for the trouble."

* * *

><p>A few times, in the first few months, he'd wished for freedom. Brief fantasies of being discovered between flashes of fire, eliminated by his guilt and reminders of his failure.</p>

He's killed countless men.

Who would go hunting for a sinner in the deepest bowels of Facultas, guarded by men trained to shoot upon sight?

His discharge is something he'd never dreamed. Three is nothing if not adaptable, takes it in stride â€“ forces ever-cycling emotions away to focus on finding the children he'd left behind.

They're gone.

It's been too long.

It's not a sinking heart but the slam of heaven's pearly gates that accompany understanding.

He'll never reach redemption.

* * *

><p>Three doesn't go to sleep most nights. Not when the only thing that awaits are the harrowing screams of children slowly burning alive.</p>

Sometimes they rip his chest open, scrabbling tiny fingers into the bloody cavity, peeling away taut flesh and knotted muscle. Their tiny fingers are comical in the knuckle guard of his trench knife, each loop five times too big, but they still determinedly lever his ribcage apart for prising out his heart. All at the same time, choking fumes force their way down his throat, faces in front of his eyes boiling off layer by layer _by layer_â€"

He gets rest eventually, though not by choice. He's failed so much that it's no surprise he'd disappointed his body too.

* * *

><p>Three has a job. It's at a freight company busy in the middle of a big contract.</p>

He's not paid, but he doesn't need to be. Facultas had given him a generous payment in exchange for the data they'd received over the handful of years. He'd been drafted by the company because he'd accidentally crushed part of a truck in the middle of yet another nauseous spell.

(He gets them a lotâ€“where the blood in his brain falls down and bile rises through his throat and up his nose, all his fluids deciding to play musical chairs without asking permission first.)

Even if the freight company's just using him because they find his strength more appealing than using machines, he doesn't care.

It's the only thing keeping him alive.

* * *

><p>In hindsight, realising takes him longer than he's expected.</p>

But it's hard for a dead soldier to conclude against instinct that he needs to kill himself _(again)_.

* * *

><p>It's difficult to track down the materials he needs, though not impossible.</p>

Over the counter, they'd said.

He's already assured too many people that _no_, he's not planning suicide, and _yes_, he needs the bleach for legitimate reasons.

* * *

><p>And the beast was taken, and with him the false prophet that wrought miracles before him, with which he deceived them that had received the mark of the beast, and them that worshipped his image. These both were cast alive into a lake of fire burning with brimstone.

* * *

><p>Three wonders if hell smells like hydrogen sulphide.</p>

* * *

><p>He finishes the last day of work he owes. On his way home he detours to buy the last ingredient. He's waited long enough.</p>

Today is the day he disappoints people no longer.

Three's ascending the stairs to his apartment when he bumps into her, a young girl in combat boots and messy dark hair. She looks at the plastic bag hanging at Three's side, blinks lazily, then casts her eyes into his own; when they meet, a sharp pulse lances through his heart.

It takes too long to recognise it as fear.

"though, the container shouldn't be visible, so she shouldn't know. Even if its shape would be evident and so would the shop's logo.

"Are you planning on killing yourself?" she asks.

She knows.

Three doesn't say anything. How can he, when she's so young? When she reminds him of the children he's failed?

(_They would nearly be her age, now._)

Her eyes break contact first. She continues her descent and walks past him.

"Fine," she says. "Just do it after I'm gone."

Three stares after her.

"...You aren't going to say anything?"

"Someone might hear us talking," is the reply. "President Okura will be mad if I'm questioned about someone's suicide again."

Three falls silent.

Just when the girl reaches the foot of the steps and is about to turn out of the front door, she stops.

"If you're going to do it, just do it. I still have... to pay him back... convincing someone who's given up on themselves is a waste of my time."

She doesn't turn to look at him again, and vanishes from his life as quickly as she'd entered.

* * *

><p>The main room of Three's apartment can be divided into two, where wooden boards end and tatami begin, by a folding wall so the two floors no longer need to share. He's never used the feature until now. It's simply more convenient to keep the room open when he lives alone.

He's thankful for it, because it means he can see the moon before he dies.

Hydrogen sulphide is an apathetic monster, never caring whom it burns. It possesses no intentions, unable to distinguish between a target or collateral in the wrong place at the wrong time. The folding wall isn't entirely airtight, so Three carefully takes the time to tape plastic across all the gaps from where the gas could escape, and leaves warning signs outside.

Three's sinned enough in his life. He doesn't need to kill anyone after death either.

Neither will death by hydrogen sulphide be easy.

Three takes a seat on the cushion against the tatami floor, and tucks his legs beneath him in seiza. An empty bucket rests in front of him, the containers of each component to either side. In the far distance, through the window, the moon begins its drift across the depths of the night sky.

All that's left is to mix both ingredients together.

Three remembers the girl's words, her request for a delay. She's recognised him enough to not force his choices, to leave alone a man who'd given... given up on themselves.

Given up on themselves.

He sits there, waiting for the right time.

He sits there, thinking about his life and the girl who recognised him, andâ€"

* * *

><p>He falls asleep.</p>

* * *

><p>Three wakes in time to watch the sun rise.</p>

* * *

><p>He might not have given up on himself, but that doesn't mean he's ready to return to the world again.</p>

* * *

><p>Half a year later, Three tracks down the mysterious President Okura, a whiskery man with fading hair and dozens of golden rings on nine digits of his hands. Miraki Lending has Yakuza connections. Okura Yuichi's missing the last finger on his right hand.</p>

He also has a private bodyguard position open, the means to obtain classified information, a preference for hiring Minimum Holders and a nature that finds the Bloody Beast's credentials more than satisfactory.

By the end of the first week, not having seen anyone younger than him working at Miraki's offices except their blond secretary, Three's wondering if he's found the wrong Okura when the girl steps through the door.

Okura shuffles over to her, as if his suit isn't worth Three's annual income, and _coos_.

(They have similar eyes. Three wonders if they're related â€" later, he finds out they aren't.)

"Good morning, sweet Hajime!" exclaims Okura; for a moment he looks like a kind uncle, rather than the ex-lieutenant of a great Yakuza family. "Aah, that super cute hat, those super cute shorts, a look of such youthful innocence... _moe_ as always! Don't you think so, Mamiya?"

The secretary Mamiya doesn't look up from the keyboard and mumbles something non-committal. Three looks back to Hajime, now he can put a name to the face that's remained in his memories, only to find her staring.

"You're alive," she says.

"...You remember?"

It's not conscious thought that makes Three's voice break. Okura is

looking at Three now, a sideways glance, one hand hovering over the pocket where Three knows the man keeps his weapon.

Hajime doesn't reply.

"How do you know Hajime?" says Okura.

Three isn't stupid enough to miss the threat beneath the words.

"She saved my life, sir," he replies. "I want to thank her."

Okura purses his lips. "And that is why the Bloody Beast wants to work for me?"

"Yes, sir."

"I see. Then, in that case, thanks of what sort?"

Three's unprepared for the question, so he doesn't manage an answer.

"Let me do you a favour, first," says Okura, "and let you know that Hajime has a debt."

Three inclines his head. "I see. Am I able to help repay that some way?"

"No. I am the only person in the world that can do that."

"Thenâ€"

"I have made many enemies, Three," says Okura. "If they kill me, Hajime will never be able to live in peace again. I will be blunt: protect me from them with everything you knowâ€"and then, you'll no longer owe her the rest of your existence by freeing her from the shackles of her debt in turn."

President Okura is a dangerous man.

Three looks to Hajime, but Hajime is looking away.

* * *

><p>"I didn't save you," Hajime tells him later. It's too late for him to change his mind â€" supposing he wants to leave her on her own. He's grown to like being around her as the shield rather than the sword, even if she's not the one he's strictly protecting. "You saved yourself."<p>

* * *

><p>File attached: A_life_without_Honey.F2

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* * *

><p>TBC/**

* * *

><p> We interrupt your regular programming to provide a huge PSA: Should you ever need to deal with a suicidal person, _*_do not leave them alone_*_*_
>Know where to find an appropriate suicide hotline by searching 'suicide prevention'. thanks. (but really: hajime is not a good role model.)_

6. 05

It's been so long since the handymen have had a proper job that, when Ratio finds Birthday in the lobby as he makes to take his usual lunch break, Ratio immediately assumes Birthday's in the mood for mooching.

"If you want something, remember to make sure I can get back in half an hour," says Ratio.

Birthday actually manages to look offended â€“ despite the fact he's all but lounging across the one of the hospital's angular chairs. His sunglasses are hanging off his teeth like he hasn't chewed anything for weeks. Ratio's toaster knows Birthday'd used his stun gun just yesterday, and Ratio knows because the toaster needs replacing.

The sunglasses are returned to their usual position, perched atop Birthday's nose.

"_Ratio_," says Birthday, "I don't _always_ meet you just for a free lunch."

"No," agrees Ratio. "You usually get free breakfast and dinner while you're at it."

"See? You love me."

Ratio sighs. "What would you like today?"

"Ramen. And," Birthday leaps to his feet, slings an arm around Ratio's shoulders so easily like it's made to belong; a slip of paper materialises in his other hand, and he waves it in front of Ratio's face, "you to get off work as soon as you can. Or to take a day off tomorrow."

"Why?"

A grin as great as the sun. "Big dollars are callingâ€“we're finally called to action!"

* * *

><p>05: Golden Goose Gambit

* * *

><p>The flower shop Anemone is close enough to where Ratio and Birthday usually spend their days that it only takes a little more than ten minutes by car, but it's far enough that Birthday wouldn't

have gone and picked up a job alone. It's quaint and little, a simple shopfront with delicate displays and various bouquets spilling colour onto the sidewalk. The shop's name is printed as simply on its sign as on its website; elegant pink atop minimalistic white, typeface subtle and not too demanding.<p>

Ratio's seen the payment quoted over the phone, jotted down in Birthday's handwriting. Anemone is not a place he would have assumed such an extravagant figure could be cultivated.

A gentle bell alerts any inhabitants within of their arrival. The interior is all warm wood and the smell of cut grass; Ratio's slammed with a sudden lack of belonging, he who possesses golden gauntlets and stands stiffly like a metal watchtower within an empty field. Birthday, clothed in chestnut and head tufted gold, is an improvement but doesn't manage to mesh either. Ratio wonders if it's the sandals or the tattoo which prevent him from fitting in.

"Welcome to Anemone," says a soft voice. It belongs to a woman behind the counter. The plants are an extension of her, or she's an extension of them, so much so that Ratio didn't notice her presence until she drew attention to it. She has scarlet hair and a kind smile.

She also has a very large chest under a blue apron. Ratio doesn't even need a second to know that Birthday's zeroed in, and kicks him.

"Ow," says Birthday. "Geez, Ratioâ€"

He's cut off. "Hello. We're looking for a Ms. Momoka."

"Ah, that's me," says the woman, Momoka. "Forgive my rudeness, but... would I be correct in assuming you are Ratio and Birthday?"

"Indeed," says Birthday, sketching a flamboyant bow. "I am Sir Birthday, and my dearest companion here is Ratio. You mentioned a price but said details were to be discussed in person... How may we be of assistance?"

"What do you think about photojournalism?" says Momoka.

"Photojournalism?"

Momoka spares half a glance back out to the street, before reaching under the counter. A photo is presented to them; it's of a spindly young man in bright street clothes, with two bandages on his cheeks and another taped across his nose.

"I would like at least five photos of this man's daily life, ones that can capture the type of person he is," says Momoka.

It's more stalking than photojournalism, but if there's anything the handymen have learnt, it's to never ask why. That still doesn't stop Ratio from inclining his head.

"Usually people would hire private investigators for a job like this," says Ratio.

"Oh, I've asked many private investigators," is the reply. "They've all been very disappointing. I've heard great reviews about you two... maybe a more colourful approach is necessary."

"You can count on us!" says Birthday. "We've got this in the bag."

Because Birthday's agreed, even if there's something about the request that has him oddly suspicious, Ratio acquiesces and goes along with him.

* * *

><p>Birthday's appropriated Ratio's car many times for many different reasons. Sometimes as a bed, sometimes for both the eating and storing of food, and sometimes as a post for asking girls out on dates.</p>

So, when Birthday decides he'd like to tape the photo onto the dashboard for whatever reason, it's only because of careful foresight and a good understanding of Birthday's whims that means Ratio keeps masking tape with him.

If he didn't, Birthday may have seriously ended up damaging the interior.

"Seventy-two hours is a very tight deadline," says Ratio.

"Some women just don't want to wait," replies Birthday, absently. "Say, don't you think that sign in the background looks familiar?"

"Which?"

It's yellow and barely visible behind their target's shoulder.

"The Sweets&Treats Bakery, in Minami Ward?" offers Ratio.

"Looks like it," says Birthday. "Actually, I'm pretty sure of it. See the shape of the crack in the corner? Doesn't it look like a hot babe?"

"_That's_ why you remember?"

"Hey, are you complaining?" "wait," Birthday blinks, "if you didn't see that, how do you recognise it?"

Ratio's chest tightens. He shrugs to try and loosen the seatbelt strapped over his shoulders, even though he knows it isn't to blame.

"I'd bumped into an old friend under there before," says Ratio. "That's all."

* * *

><p>"Iâ€"I've never seen him in my life," whispers the man whose name tag reads 'Sato'.</p>

Birthday grins and rolls forward onto the balls of his feet.

It's probably more than a little mean that he'd barged into the small shop, blatantly bypassed the rows of baked goods and woven around the small island displays before suddenly asking (_demanding_) the people behind the counter if they knew the guy in the photo. Especially since it's bad for public image. Ratio'd followed silently, uncomplaining, that great white coat commanding the presence Birthday lacks.

Mean, sure. But hey, they have work to do.

(Birthday wonders how Ratio deals with him sometimes, really.)

They've been through this before, of course. Birthday asks the questions, Ratio stands by. Not that they'll need the Perspective Minimum in this case to determine if Sato's lying — Sato's looking everywhere except directly toward them, grasping weakly at his sleeves.

Take five photos of some guy for a chick with super rocking tits? The way things're going, the amount they'll be paid for it...

Easiest job in the world.

Sato's _way_ freaky tall, though, like he's related to a skyscraper, so Birthday has to settle with peering upwards in a totally earnest and non-creepy manner.

"_Really?_ You _sure_ you've never met him before?"

Birthday senses more than sees Ratio shifting beside him. He imagines how utterly imposing Ratio has to look in that moment, badass eyepatch and no-nonsense leather gloves and all, and stifles a giggle. Not the time.

The two of them leave with an address, minutes later.

* * *

><p>MIRAKI LENDING

The building is a shop squashed between an apartment complex to either side. The apartments are burnt with watermarks and wear where Miraki Lending glows with light and life.

Birthday looks at the sign and, for some reason, has to suppress a shudder.

"Okay, Birthday?" asks Ratio.

Of course Ratio still notices.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just... I dunno, doesn't this place creep you out a little?"

Ratio glances around. Birthday does too, trying to pinpoint the source, but all he sees are normal Japanese streets filled with normal Japanese people; normal shopfronts and absolutely nothing out

of the ordinary. A blur alerts him to Ratio lifting the eyepatch for closer examination of their surrounds.

There's a long pause.

"...It's full of Minimum."

"You can see Minimums now?" says Birthday.

Ratio shakes his head. "Some of the physiology is strange in the people working around the area. It's hard to tell, the buildings are shielding. I might be wrong."

"Well," says Birthday, leaping ahead, pivoting on one foot so he can face Ratio at the same time, "let's go ahead to this 'Miraki Lending' place and find this guy anyway!"

"Who are you looking for?"

Birthday didn't scream at the voice behind him where there'd previously been thin air. The sudden, monotonous words don't remind him of decapitated zombie heads at all. It's not like Birthday has a weakness for horror movies or anything. Honest.

"_Gah?!_"

...Okay, so Birthday might have yelped. A bit. Normal, right?

He hops back into a crouch. Of all the things he expected, it definitely isn't a young girl in an ultra-fashionable blue hoodie, sending him a stare so bland she wouldn't even sneeze if he added pepper.

(Birthday looks further down, sees toned thighs and short shorts, and thinks: _cute, but not really sexy._ Not like Momoka, who's a blessing from above. Wow. _Momoka._)

"Hajime," comes a voice so low it may as well be a growl â€“ and it's from Miraki's doorstep, where a beast of a man stands, made of so much muscle that he's literally as wide as the girl is _tall_, "is this boy bothering you?"

Ratio's reassuring presence joins Birthday's side. Birthday wants to hug him.

"If he is, I apologise," says Ratio, to the beast-man. "We're looking to speak to someone who works at Miraki Lending."

He's ignored; Hajime turns away from Ratio and Birthday.

"Are the pancakes done yet?"

The beast-man moves his head back inside. "Mamiya, has the president finished Hajime's pancakes yet?" After a short pause, a reply is apparently received, since the beast-man shifts so he's looking back at Hajime again. "Ten minutes."

Hajime frowns.

"I work for Miraki," she tells Ratio and Birthday. "Who are you

looking for?"

Birthday and Ratio exchange a glance. Why not, says Birthday; Alright, replies Ratio.

The photo from Momoka is extracted from a pocket and handed over. Hajime's eyes narrow sharply on sight, and it's taken with tense shoulders and shaking hands. For a long second she's silent, then, faster than they can react, her fingers curl around the side and rip it into two. Two pieces become four, four become eightâ€"and then nothing remains except tiny scraps and shredded confetti.

Birthday's jaw drops. His sunglasses slip off his nose, and beside him, Ratio stiffens before locking his fists together. Fortunately, the gloves aren't off.

Yet.

"Hey!" says Birthday. "What was that for?"

A divine gust of wind rushes past, sweep Hajime's bangs across her face, taking with it any impassivity in her expression. It leaves only the icy glare of a dragon uncoiling from long sleep; a deity of tumultuous seas sealed within the body of a fragile girl, freed into the mortal realm.

"I won't let anybody take him," she says, and opens her hands.

The wind snatches the remains of the photo away.

* * *

><p>"This sucks," says Birthday.</p>

They're back in Ratio's car, having picked it up from the car park, and Ratio's driving. Birthday leans back against the seat and wishes he could roll over. Unfortunately, the fact that Ratio's car is ultra-sporty and thus needs bucket seats to look ultra-cool means that rolling over isn't as comfortable as he really would have liked it to be.

Birthday closes his eyes instead.

"This sucks," he repeats, just for good measure. "Seriously, all we need are five photos, but we lost our only lead! How did it get so hard?"

Ratio's still driving, so he doesn't reply.

Birthday cracks an eye open in the middle of extended silence.
"Where're we headed, Ratiocchi?"

"Yokohama Chinatown."

"Chinatown?" Not exactly the answer Birthday'd been expecting.

"I wonder if it's worth asking Mao."

"Mao? That informant guy?"

"That's him."

Birthday straightens. He's awake now. "Can we even get any info without being able to ask what we even need?"

"I'm not sure," says Ratio. "Logically that would be an impossibility, however... so is a large portion of the information he gathers. It's worth a try."

There's another pause between them. They're slowly nearing Chinatown now; the police headquarters building passes on one side.

Birthday's sure it's not his imagination when Ratio gives it a long glance.

"Ratio?" says Birthday.

"Yes?"

"What are you thinking?"

There's no answer.

Not for the first time, Birthday's upset by the backwardness of Ratio's foreign import — the right-hand design means he's only able to stare at Ratio's eyepatch, so it's hard to read Ratio's eyes. The hands are tense against the wheel, however. The shoulders are tense too.

Birthday leans over and pokes him. It's testimony to Ratio's nerves when he loses concentration, and the car briefly swerves aside for a fraction of a second; fortunately, Ratio's able to recover before they crash or any other horrible things occur.

"What are you doing?" hisses Ratio.

The car behind them isn't impressed either if the beeping is any indication. Birthday sits back.

"You were being stupid again," says Birthday. "I thought I killed that face. Come on, spill."

"...He works there."

"Who? One of your patients?" No response; Birthday wracks his brain; guessing games with Ratio are usually easy, but not when he can't tell what's going on in Ratio's head at all.

At all?

_ "I'd bumped into an old friend under there before. That's all." _

Birthday watches Ratio very carefully. "It wouldn't be that 'old friend' you met under that sign, would it?"

Stiffly, Ratio nods.

Bingo.

"If it's not Chiyuu, since Chiyuu's definitely not a guy, and you weren't particularly close to anyone else at school," says Birthday, "I don't know them, do I?"

Ratio's silent.

"Do you miss him?" asks Birthday.

"I don't have time to meet him," says Ratio.

"But you have time to hang out with me."

The car turns.

"What's your point, Birthday? We've parted ways. He's got his job and I have mine."

"You don't have a life!" says Birthday, thinking: no life without me. "If you want to meet your other friends, go ahead. I'm not the only person in the world."

The rest of the journey is taken in silence. Birthday hates reminding Ratio about his weakness; both their weaknesses.

He hates holding Ratio back even more.

* * *

><p>It's not Mao behind the counter.</p>

Birthday's pretty sure his eyes bugged when he sees the person their target casually reading the newspaper. The Chinese newspaper. He's also wearing some traditionally Chinese-inspired outfit instead of the clothes he'd been wearing in the photo, but not even the pair of stupid glasses can render the three bandages on his face invisible or hide away the rough features beneath brown hair.

There's no doubt about it. It's definitely him.

"Y-youâ€" "

The man looks up. "Ah, welcome." He speaks with an accent that matches his Chinese theme.

Birthday opens his mouth. He closes it wordlessly.

Thankfully, Ratio's not impersonating a dying fish. "Where is Mao?"

"One of those customers?" asks the man. He receives two nods in reply, folds the newspaper neatly before placing it aside, then leans forward over the counter. "Mao is away for now. I... am his partner. What do you need?"

Ohh, blunt.

Birthday notes the lazy scratching of a bandage and stretches his arms behind his head; thinks: two can play this game.

"Photos of you," says Birthday.

Ratio glances across. "_Birthday_â€"

"Me?" asks the man. "I'd no idea I'd become so popular."

"You definitely are," says Birthday. "Totally, absolutely. So popular you've got fans wanting to know what it's like; 'A Day in the Life of...' â€ sorry, I don't think we ever caught your name."

There's a smirk. Birthday responds with a grin even when he's kicked in the shin.

"Feng," says the man â€ indulgently, because with such a dreadful hook the reply can't be anything but. "'A Day in the Life of Feng', huh?"

Birthday snaps his fingers and strikes a majestic pose.

"_Yes!_" says Birthday. "Amazing! _Fantastic!_ I see it now... shining ever brightly in the darkest skies, the eerie wind stealing candy in the night...! Knock everything down, newsflash; 'A Day in the Life of Feng' will be the top-blockbuster hit of the century! Lights, camera, actionâ€_you._"

When his only reply is silence, Birthday wonders if he's misjudged the situation. But then he notices that Feng's shaking, shoulders vibrating up and downâ€"and then Feng's laugh breaks through his throat and flies free into the open air. It's a disgusting laugh, in Birthday's opinion, all choking consonants and guttural syllables, the stuff weeds are made of and fairies die from, but it's still a laugh that Birthday's achieved.

Ratio's looking at Birthday like he's wondering if his head is screwed on correctly. Birthday wants to know that himself, because when did he take a left turn into Bizarro Lane?

Either way, he's good. Real good. Man, he's the best.

Feng removes the glasses and rises to his feet.

"I'll need to make a phone call," he says. The accent is gone. "If Mao agrees, I don't see the harm in letting Odd Jobs' Ratio and Birthday fulfil a request they never should have gotten so close to completing."

* * *

><p>"Damn," says Birthday, after Feng steps out back. "He was onto us all along."</p>

Ratio's doesn't point out that he'd expected as much, since there wouldn't be any other reason for Feng to reveal himself as Mao's partner if it weren't as a warning.

There's something about Feng that stirs odd instincts Ratio never knew he had. Ratio stares at the door Feng'd left through, trying to decipher their mysterious code.

All he understands is that Feng feels like Momoka.

What that means, he has no idea.

"That kind of stunt's going to kill you one day, Birthday," says Ratio.

"In that case, you'll have to avenge me," says Birthday's voice â€" from behind the counter, definitely not where Ratio expected him to be. "_A-ra~?_"

Birthday's poking at something in the line of shelves along the wall. Ratio nearly runs over to pull him back. He's stopped only because of the knowledge that, if he does, it would attract even more attention.

"Birthday, what are youâ€" "

He's ignored. "Isn't that...?"

"What?"

Birthday turns around. In his hands he's holding a photo identical to the one Momoka'd given them, the one which had been ripped apart by Hajime.

There's the sound of footsteps. Birthday doesn't get a chance to cover his tracks when Feng emerges from the back room. Feng leans against the doorframe, hands tucked in his pockets; he's changed back into the vest and jeans, and Ratio notices the earphones in his ears.

"You've got guts," says Feng.

"Sorry," says Birthday. "I was wondering if you had a secret porn stash back here."

Feng doesn't even react.

Ratio takes it as an indication to continue. "That photo...?"

"It belonged to a private investigator that tried to stalk me yesterday," says Feng. "Since both of you recognise it, I'd like the copies you have as well."

"Ours is gone," says Birthday.

"Gone how?"

"It was destroyed when we went to investigate at Miraki Lending."

Feng watches them for several long seconds, eyes sharp and assessing. Birthday's fidgeting, twirling the photo between his fingers, whilst Ratio remains perfectly still. Whatever Feng is looking for, he likely finds it, because he walks over. One hand is held out to take back the photo; Birthday obliges, before retreating back to Ratio's side.

The photo's returned to the shelf, and disappears from view.

"Mao gave his okay," says Feng. "Let's go. Where'd you park your car?"

Ratio tells him. Feng nods in acknowledgement, walks them out of the shop, and locks the doors behind him.

* * *

><p>They're in the streets of Naka Ward, travelling back to Anemone, when Birthday suddenly rises out of his seat and presses his hands and face against the window. Ratio assumes he's seen a girl, but he's mainly hoping that god, don't let Birthday be licking the glass again.

"Wait, wait, wait, _wait!_" says Birthday. "Hold on a second, turn right!"

Ratio switches lanes without hesitation.

â€"After the turn, he finds out that it's not a girl that had caught Birthday's attention but a very, very distinctive building.

Birthday's grinning. "Don't think you get to avoid it, Ratio."

It's too late. The police department nears ever closer.

"I hate you," says Ratio, without malice; he knows what Birthday's trying to do.

"I love you too."

* * *

><p>If Birthday hadn't been convinced that Ratio's actually an old man, meeting Ratio's friend did the trick.<p>

Truth be told, Birthday hadn't thought any further than "Get Ratio in that building where his friend works". Fortunately for him, they'd barely entered when Ratio stopped in his tracks, because Ratio's friend had been in the lobby. Birthday follows Ratio's gaze to a young man with white hair next to an old guy, who also had white hair.

If forced to choose, Birthday would have picked the younger as the friend in question.

Their approach isn't without notice, especially since Birthday is positively _manhandling _Ratio towards them; both men look up, the young man politely curious and the old guy halfway through a sentence â€"

- and Birthday watches as the old guy trails off, eyebrows shooting up into the sky.

"Ratio?"

...Of course, it turns out Ratio's friend is the other one.

Not that Birthday's really complaining. The old man's a chill

sweatpants kind of dude that has so much cool he has to wear his collar wide open. There's a small white ponytail off his chin and a darker ponytail at his neck, and did Birthday mention the cane yet? Practical _and_ stylish. Ratio's taste is damn fine.

(They also both have one eye visible at all times, which Birthday notes consideringly. Cyclops party?)

Birthday's still holding onto Ratio's shoulders, so all Ratio can do is nod. "Good afternoon, Gasquet."

"Good afternoon to you too," says Gasquet. "This is definitely a surprise. Ohâ€œ" he turns to the young man beside him, "this is Art. Art, this is Ratio. He's the kid who helped Miwako."

"It's nice to meet you," says Art, and bows.

Art's hair isn't actually white, now that Birthday's close enough that the yellow wash from overhead lights can't bleed all the lavender away. His eyes are at once confident and kind, and when he smiles, the mole under his left eye smiles with him.

Cute.

"I'm Birthday," says Birthday, before Ratio gets a chance to introduce him in turn. He releases Ratio's shoulders, moves aside to return the bow with a quick one of his own, then slides closer. "What's this about a Miwako, Ratio? That's a girl's name. I didn't know Ratio knew girls."

"It was before we met," says Ratio, dismissively. "I apologise, are we interrupting?"

Gasquet shakes his head. "Not at all. I'm just making sure Art takes his break instead of going back to work. It's been a while. How's life as a doctor treating you?"

"Not bad. Sometimes it's hard, but... it's good."

"Make sure you keep putting that eye to good use, alright?"

"I will."

Birthday eyes Ratio closely. He's starting to relax again.

"Art," says Gasquet, "if you ever need a doctor for anything, I recommend Ratio."

Art looks to them curiously.

"If I may ask, are you Agency certified?" says Art.

[_ Agency â€œ the Minimum Agency. The Agency certified are those professionals officially sworn into the secret of the Minimum._]

"I am," says Ratio. "Would you like my business card?"

"I would, thank you."

Ratio searches in his pockets, finds his case, then extends a

business card with a slight bow. Art nods, then offers his own in turn. If Birthday cranes his head, Art's reads Superintendent, and Birthday whistles mentally because Art is really, really young. Confirmation: Facultas alum.

Art spends some time reading Ratio's card, committing the details to memory, before storing it safely within a sleek holder.

He checks the time.

"May I go back to work now, Mr. Gasquet?" says Art.

Gasquet chuckles. "Go ahead, I'm not your boss. It's amazing you still keep me around."

"Please don't joke about that," says Art. "You're still very important to me."

"And to Ratio," adds Birthday, ignoring the way Ratio tenses next to him. Well, it's true â€“ what were with the reactions earlier then, otherwise? "In fact, as Ratio's bestest buddy since forever, I'll personally make sure he visits more from now on."

"Don't go promising things like that!" says Ratio.

"Too late," says Birthday. "I already did. You know what this means, right? Now you have to keep it."

"_Birthday_â€"

Birthday tilts his head toward Gasquet. "Look."

Ratio does.

He's seeing what Birthday's seeing, now: Gasquet stunned into silence, eye wide and cheeks in high colour. Gasquet's lips move like they're trying to speak, but no words are formed. Slowly, Gasquet closes his eye, takes a deep breath, and then grins so wide his cheekbones threaten to pop out of his skin.

"Heh," says Gasquet. "Seems like this old man still has something to look forward to."

"Nah, gramps," says Birthday. "Love the necklace â€“ you're pretty cool. Still, I bet Ratio's older than you."

Ratio looks like he doesn't know whether he wants to say That doesn't make any sense or You were born before me, Birthday. A shifting in the corner of Birthday's eye alerts him to Art, who's taken half a step closer.

"Birthday, was it?" asks Art.

"The one and only," says Birthday.

Art doesn't smile. A smile alone can't describe the rush of satisfaction sending warmth and confidence bursting across the edges of Birthday's consciousness like sparks in a windstorm.

So Art makes that strange expression that's magic and electricity,

and says, "Thank you."

..._Damn_ son.

Birthday resists the urge to shuffle, and wonders if that charisma could be used as a weapon â€“ a chick-picking weapon. Maybe bottled into some sort of spray? _Electromagnetism, _by Art. Perfect.

(Of course, Ratio, being Ratio, always knows when Birthday starts to contemplate stupid things, so Birthday's subject to an unimpressed stare. Birthday still makes a note to ask Art about it later.)

After a quick comment to Gasquet about some case files and pages, Art excuses himself politely before leaving.

"Sooo," says Birthday, "got any hobbies and stuff, Mr. Cool? Ratio needs some."

"Mr. Cool?" echoes Gasquet. "Eh, sure, but they're a little old-fashioned..."

"_Kurofune_. "

Two heads swivel toward Ratio. Ratio's eye twitches, and he glances away. "Youâ€™re going to see it. With Miwako. Did you ever...?"

"...No."

"They're â€“ bringing it back in Osaka next month," says Ratio.

Birthday puts aside the obvious question of what it is or how Ratio knows, recognising a chance when he sees one. "Then let's all go!"

"What?" says Ratio.

"To watch it, duh," says Birthday. "You, Mr. Cool, me â€“ and hey, we can even drag Art along or something. Uh, are you guys free next month?"

"Depends how soon we can wrap this current case up," says Gasquet.

"_Birthday_. "

Birthday looks to Ratio, and Ratio is frowning.

"What?" says Birthday.

"I appreciate it, but... you don't need to try force yourâ€""

"Life's too short _not_ to try new things."

Ratio's cut off before he can get in another reply.

"Going together..." says Gasquet. "I would like that. It's been fifteen years since I've seen an opera."

Birthday blinks. "Wait, _what?_"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," says Ratio. "'The Black Ships' is opera. You fell asleep and snored the last time we went to a theatre."

...So maybe he did.

"S-so what?" Birthday grins. It's a little weaker than he'd like it to be. "Chicks love a guy who's into that stuff. Opera."

Gasquet's laughter follows Birthday all the way home.

* * *

><p>Birthday looks at Ratio, how a huge weight has been lifted from his conscience â€“ the full depths of which he can't see, but knows is thereâ€“and realises that he's looking forward to next month too.</p>

He tries ignoring the thunderclouds billowing darkness out of the horizon. He hasn't had an attack for weeks, and he'd hidden the last one so well that Ratio doesn't know.

Just because the weather forecast says that it's going to be rain, rain and more rain, doesn't mean it's a sign.

The weather is the weather, and has nothing to do with anything that isn't itself.

Birthday's going to be fine.

* * *

><p>"Hey, hold up," says Birthday. "Aren't you going to tell me about the story behind this Miwako?"</p>

* * *

><p>It's nearing nightfall by the time they return to Anemone. Momoka looks over the collection of six photos they'd taken, five plus an extra to make up for the one they'd lost, body language perfectly neutral and giving nothing away.</p>

Feng'd been very generous once they understood that all he wanted was time to himself without investigators looking his way. That didn't mean he'd been trusting. He may have hitched a ride in Ratio's car, but he'd always sat directly behind Birthday â€“ a convenient hostage, should either of them have had anything sinister planned.

(Ratio remembers Feng's gait, the way he smoothly phases from one location to another rather than haltingly walk; his moniker extends not only to fickle emotions but to his very person.)

If Momoka notices that the photos had been staged, she makes no comment. Yamashita Park, Minato Mirai, eating ice-cream on a random street in Isogo Ward... shots chosen by Feng, and locations undoubtedly offbeat to his regular rhythm.

"Again," says Ratio, "we apologise for losing the photo we initially received."

"It's fine," replies Momoka. She flips through the photos again. Convenience store, Shin-Yokohama Station. "These are more than satisfactory."

Momoka opens a drawer, then hands them an envelope. Ratio takes it and looks inside; she's paid them in cash. He puts the envelope in one of his pockets.

"May I ask where Birthday is?" says Momoka, suddenly.

Ratio tilts his head to where he's parked the car. "He isn't feeling too well."

Which is partly true, but mostly means that Birthday's poker face is far too questionable in front of someone as... well-proportioned as Momoka.

"I see," says Momoka, and she smiles. "I wish him the best recovery. The two of you are really something."

Ratio bows, thanks her, and takes his leave. The bell in the doorway chimes softly behind him.

He misses the way Momoka slides a finger across one of the photos, tracing the edge of a face frozen in time.

"So," she muses. "This is who you're working with, Moral."

* * *

><p>TBC/**

7. 06

"Another one from that guy, eh?"

It's more an off-hand comment than anything requiring an answer, so Gasquet doesn't expect Art to reply. The restaurant's kitchen is a cross between a spaceship and a bunker; it's cramped, with walkways barely wide enough to fit a person and a half, and lit with sterile white light from square panels in the ceiling. Every surface from the waist up is the silky sheen of stainless steel, interrupted only by the range hood's great gaping maw to one side of the room. They're followed by five sets of blurry reflections as they're escorted to the freezer.

Art knows the lead investigator. Haneda's worked with him on many occasions, Gasquet even more, a dependable man nearing forty years old with a wife and young daughter. There'd been no time for anything other than brief greetings when Art and Gasquet had arrived.

The first thing Art notices beyond the forensics assigned to the site is the small amount of blood.

"I take it the victim wasn't killed here?" says Art.

"Most likely not," is Haneda's reply. "That's all the blood there is in the area. The victim was strangled before his head was cut open, with initial estimations at about one or two o'clock this morning. We're still searching for the object used to cut open the skull, and the scene of the crime."

Art glances at the body. He doesn't dwell on the carmine tracks of dried blood running down the face and pooling onto clothes, the dark bruise ringed around its neck or how the skull is undoubtedly empty. Any bubbling disgust is squashed immediately, instantly redirected to determination.

All the more reason to catch the Minimum Holder serial killer.

Art senses more than sees Gasquet shift beside him. "Do we have an ID on the victim?"

"Not yet. There were no personal belongings with him," says Haneda. "Inspector Nagaki sends his apologies for not being here to meet you two at the moment and expects to finish interviewing in an hour â€“ is there anything either of you wanted to investigate specifically?"

"Nothing at the moment," says Art. "Mr. Gasquet?"

"None on my end."

Art turns back to Haneda and gives a slight bow. "Thanks for all your work. We'll leave this in your hands," he says. "Would you like me to let your family know you'll be off-shift later than usual today?"

Haneda doesn't smile, because it's hard to feel anything at a crime scene aside the bitter churning which accompanies loss of human life, but his lips do twitch a little in response.

"You know us too well, Superintendent."

All Art thinks, as he and Gasquet leave for the station again â€“ in the wake of another life and mind stolen by a criminal they've been chasing with motives they still have no leads on â€“ is that sometimesâ€"

(because you have no Minimum)

â€"knowing his people is the only thing he has the power to do.

* * *

><p>Sometimes Art is grateful that Gasquet knows how to drive.</p>

It's not something that needs to be said; Gasquet'd extended his hand for the keys, and Art had handed them across without complaint or asking why.

The car stalls at a traffic light, windows gather dotted raindrops as the weather accompanies them in mourning â€“ even if bright umbrellas open one by one in the streets around them. Bursts of colour in a

world of grey, held by people who don't know how lucky they are to still be alive. People who'd live their lives, unaware of the existence of the Minimum.

Gasquet takes the opportunity to glance at Art. Art's leaning on his knuckles, looking out the window â€“ so still that it wouldn't be a surprise if he weren't breathing.

Sometimes it's all too easy to forget that, for all his poise and elegance, Gasquet'd only met Art as an eighteen-year-old graduate three years ago.

"He's shown excellent talent," the former Superintendent had said, to a Gasquet that knew of Facultas graduates' exceptional academic standards but hadn't understood at the time just what it meant for someone so young to have learnt so much. "We've given him some cases â€“ basics, mostly, so there's a reason to promote him to the rank we need him to be â€“ and you've been selected to help him."

"Me, sir?" Gasquet'd asked.

"You were a Lieutenant for the Japanese Self Defence Forces, but more importantly, you already know about Minimum."

Sometimes, Gasquet wonders how many others had also been a possible candidate, and how close he'd been to never knowing Art at all. Art, who ate so many sweets it's a wonder he isn't made of sugar himself; Art, who he could tell stories to for hours on end -

Art. The man who'd graduated from Facultas Academy without a Minimum of his own.

The traffic lights change to green. The world stops holding its breath, and lets them drive on.

"Art," says Gasquet. "If you need me, I'm here."

There's a short pause. They're nearly back at the police's headquarters. Art straightens as if he's just remembered his existence, and brushes a hand quickly through his hair.

"Iâ€“" begins Art. He clears his throat. "Thank you, Mr. Gasquet. I'll â€“ keep it in mind. For now we have to finish what we can, until Inspector Nagaki has gathered more information."

Gasquet nods, even though he knows. Art's reminding himself more.

"We should be receiving the last few reports for the serial bombing case today, correct?" asks Art.

"Right. They finished searching Tachikawa's home yesterday. The report for his fiancÃ©e's place should be here in a few hours."

"Tachikawa's report is in?"

"It was when you were briefed about this incident. I think it's in the glove box."

The glove box is clicked open. There's the sound of rustling pages.

"Mr. Gasquet, you aren't supposed to take these documents out of the building," says Art. He's smiling; Gasquet can hear it.

"Put them back, then." says Gasquet.

"Maybe later. I may as well read them now."

Gasquet takes the turn into the station's entrance; the building watches over them, a tower inlaid with a grid of dark square windows, mounted atop an entrance sentried by great stone supports. At the gate booth, the stationed officers wave at them through the rain. The car slows.

"Only you'd try working in these conditions, Artâ€""

He's cut off by a sharp knock on the passenger side window. It's not an officer; Gasquet doesn't recognise the person in the bright street clothes until Art opens the window enough for the man to lean down. The handle of a black umbrella rests against his shoulder.

Gasquet sees brown hair and three bandages, and understands immediately.

"Hey, Art," says Feng.

"What are you doing here?" says Art.

Feng grins. His eyes flicker briefly to Gasquet; any doubt that the man isn't working with Mao is dispelled immediately. They have the same gaze: Right now, I know more than you.

"I can't visit my favourite officer?" asks Feng rhetorically. "I have some information about this morning's incident you might like. Are you free?"

"How long are we talking about?"

A bandage is scratched thoughtfully. "Two, maybe three hours tops?"

"I..."

"No cost, just some of your time," says Feng. "Then you'll get the victim's ID. The police won't get a missing persons report for days if a guy has no family to report him missing."

Art turns around. "Mr. Gasquet?"

"I trust your judgement," says Gasquet. He doesn't mention how he has trouble focusing on Feng's smile â€“ it leeches away his life and energy, weighs him down, makes jokes about his age come true. "If it's necessary, I can handle things for a few hours."

Art nods. "Thank you, Mr. Gasquet."

When Art opens the door, and Feng hops back before offering him the empty space under his umbrella, Gasquet only stares. Art doesn't step

out immediately, however; he returns the report back to the glove box. The movement is used to hide adjusting his collar, allowing Gasquet to see the firearm nested securely in its holster, and Art catches his eye as if to say, _don't worry. I'm not going in blind._

It's some small comfort, but not enough.

"I'll be in the archives until you get back," says Gasquet, softly so he's not overheard. "You can always call."

"I know," says Art. "I do have you on speed dial."

Gasquet's still watching them when they leave. Feng waves cheekily, then tips back the umbrella so the black canopy swallows Art's head into shadow. A mass makes itself present in Gasquet's rear-view mirror, another police car requesting entry into the premises. Gasquet drives inside to let it pass.

By the time he's parked the vehicle, the two have disappeared altogether.

* * *

><p>"Why do you need me?"</p>

It's slightly awkward sharing the same umbrella with Nice, only because the man's apparently never learnt how to share an umbrella before; he keeps twirling it between his fingers with no regard for how Art's hair could be stuck in its ribs, and he keeps it tilted at all the wrong angles. Thankfully, the rain's light enough that Art's suit is only gently sprinkled, despite being intense enough to be a nuisance when falling into his eyes.

Nice shrugs, and the umbrella moves with him. Water falls onto Art's forehead.

(Art _really_ shouldn't have left his umbrella in his office, or foregone borrowing Gasquet's instead.)

"Why not?" says Nice.

"That's what you said after I asked for your name," says Art.

"I didn't think you'd remember something like that."

Art does. It'd been the reply after asking if Nice, too, had once attended Facultas. "Why not?", a reaction unusual.

For a moment, surrounded by streets that should be familiar but were alien amidst rain and the engima's presence beside him, Art wonders where his guard has gone â€“ only to find it's still there. Art watches how Nice stretches his other hand out in the rain, then waves it around to catch as many raindrops he can in his palm. There's so much radiance in that smile that Art finds himself copying it unconsciously.

Nice is having fun.

There are a few reasons for Art to deny him of it, but he decides

against them. Art will play his game for a few hours today.

"Where are we going?" asks Art, once they've stopped at a crossing. The bright traffic lights cut through thick grey air. A scooter speeds past, its slipstream pressing his trousers against his legs.

"To catch a bus."

"A bus?"

"There's a cafÃ© in Minamisaiwai that makes great coffee. Or if you'd like, we can always walk. It'd take about forty minutes to get there. Have you had breakfast?"

"Iâ€"have," says Art, slightly overwhelmed by the sudden change in topic. He thinks back to the slice of toast he'd grabbed in his hurry, after learning the serial killer had struck again. "And either method of transport is fine."

"Okay," says Nice. "Walking it is, then."

"Didn't you say...?"

"Today's a beautiful day."

Art glances across. The sky is dispirited and crying, but Nice isn't joking.

"It's raining," says Art.

"Yes," agrees Nice. "So there aren't that many people who idle around. It's not windy, nor is it raining hard enough that an umbrella can't keep the worst of it away. Plus, it's not disgustingly hot and the air feels fresher. Win-win."

Art surprises himself when he huffs; half a laugh.

"That's an interesting logic," he says.

Apparently he's not convincing enough, since he's subject to a frown and affronted stare. "What do you think an ideal day is, then?"

"Maybe one where there are no cases left."

"You'd be out of a job," Nice points out.

"Is that such a bad thing?"

There's no response until they reach their destination.

* * *

><p>CafÃ© Nowhere is a small establishment that glows on the side of the road. The doors give way to a wonderland of butterscotch floors and caramel walls, and welcoming warm air is quick to replace wet and grey reality. It's late enough on a working day that the cafÃ© is empty.</p>

Nice drops his umbrella unceremoniously into the basket at the entrance. By the time it stills, they're greeted by a young girl with glasses and intelligent eyes.

Curiously enough, she also has a tail.

"Another meeting, Nice?" she asks.

"Yep," Nice replies. He leans aside to wave at a heavyset man in the process of grinding coffee beans by hand. "Yo, Master."

Master nods a greeting in return. He doesn't need to speak to maintain a silent presence in the room, and reminds Art of Gasquet; hard working and reliable.

"Welcome," says the girl, to Art directly. "Please, follow me."

A few strides later, Nice and Art have been escorted to a table by the window, and two menus are placed between them. Nice takes a seat formally, back straight and shoulders level, and it's an interesting contrast to the casual ease by which he'd greeted the cafÃ©'s staff. Art realises he's done the same.

"I didn't take you for an idealist," comments Nice.

Art scans the cake selection on the menu idly. "I don't think I am."

"Huh."

A movement in the corner of Art's eye catches his attention. The girl's holding a pen atop a pad with the same enthusiasm as her smile. Her tail is swishing slowly as she waits to take their order.

Art chooses the coffee and cake set. Hot or cold coffee? Hot, please. Nice sits back in his chair and says something to her in a foreign language. It takes a while for Art to recognise it as German; the girl takes just as long to formulate a reply. Art doesn't need to know the language to hear how the guttural phonetics are harder for her to match compared to him.

The girl excuses herself from the table, and Art stares at her as she returns to the bar.

Nice notices his gaze.

"That's Koneko," says Nice. "She's studying to be a polyglot. Something about it being good for customer service or whatever. I tutor her in my spare time."

That hadn't been Art's question. "Her tail..."

"Ah, that. That's magic."

"By which you mean you're not going to tell me?"

"Bingo. I'm sure you can figure it out, Superintendent."

Art's still puzzling by the time Koneko brings their orders to them:

his coffee and chocolate cake, andâ€"

Nice has ordered a glass of milk.

While Art carefully counts the sugar cubes he adds to his drink â€“ not so little that the coffee would be bitter, but not so many that it would overpower the taste of the cake â€“ he realises he's starting to associate the definition of unpredictability with Nice more and more.

He checks the time. Nice's definition of "forty minutes" turns out to only apply at a brisk walk, as over an hour has passed already. Art will forego most of his break later.

"Why?" asks Art.

"Why what?"

"You'd prefer my time instead of any other payment."

Nice tilts his head. "Why not? I was bored. Hajime's at work. You're really interesting. Since Mao came back with your vic's ID in the latest batch of data, I thought I'd kill some time."

"That's it?"

"Should I have said something else?"

...Was Art expecting anything?

Art turns his attention to the coffee. CafÃ© Nowhere's blend is just as good as Nice had said it would be.

"You always surprise me," says Nice, suddenly.

Art spears a portion of the cake with his fork. There's not much to say in reply. He wonders how much information Nice is willing to share.

"When did you learn German?" asks Art.

"Eight years ago."

"Facultas?"

"Where else?"

A pause is hidden by contemplative chewing. Nice has leant forward at some point, and he wears an expression like he knows what Art's doing and is only humouring him accordingly.

There are certainly worse ways to pass the next â€“ hour and a half? One hour and thirty-two minutes.

Art swallows and chooses his words carefully. "Facultas has never had a student called 'Nice'."

"Really?" says Nice. "I didâ€"" a quick intake of breath, so brief Art may have imagined it, "â€"quit partway. Were you checking the lists of graduates they send every year?"

"...No. I â€“ had access to their entire student history, and the list of all Holders they know. Of both branches in Japan."

The Minimum Agency had been slow to respond to his request, but the board of bureaucrats and executive officers had eventually conceded a few weeks ago. Even they could not deny the risk of the Minimum Holder serial killer running around the country. Art had checked for Nice's name in the directory as soon as their last meeting had come to a close, as well as Hajime's.

Neither had been there.

Nice starts scratching one of his bandages again. "I'm impressed, but unsurprised."

"Unsurprised?"

"You could say I was a... special case. I haven't lied â€“ Nice is the name they gave me when I was enrolled there. Never bothered changing it again."

"I see," says Art. He wonders if Nice has realised his body language has become defensive, or if it's entirely subconscious; the man is looking away, watching a film only screening to himself, and his scratching has moved to the bridge of his nose so his hand blocks part of his face from view.

The hand drops and the eyes trail back to Art by the time half the cake is gone.

"Skill," says Nice.

Art's fingers freeze. The handle of the coffee cup drops â€“ fortunately, it hadn't yet been raised.

Nice continues. "He was forced to leave Facultas after being unable to manifest a Minimum. Later, he was killed by terrorists on a bus. That's why you became a Superintendent, isn't it?"

"How did youâ€" "

"I asked Mao."

Another flashback of their prior meeting makes itself known. A reference to Mao, linked to Art's personal details, again. Last time, it had been about his addressâ€"an address, and details about Tachikawa Kenta's arrest that, according to Nice, Chinen Ayami shouldn't have known.

Art's still searching for the source of the leak. Hopefully the search of her house will deliver results.

Howeverâ€"

"Where does Mao get his information from?" asks Art. It's slightly more aggressive than he intends.

"Huh," says Nice. "So you do have information you consider private."

"Please answer the question."

"He gets it from me."

Art blinks; "_You...?_"

Casually, as if he's in the company of an old friend rather than one of the most powerful police officers in the country, Nice picks up the half-empty glass of milk and moves it aside. Using his pointer finger, he draws a line toward him where it used to be.

"Data is raw facts, simple statistics," he says, tapping the surface of the table on one side of the line. "Information," and the finger is moved to the other, "is when that data is processed into something useful. The time in which you leave work and which traffic lights you stop at afterwards are data points when seen individually. Added context, it's information that describes your working hours and the route you take home. I do this synthesizing for Mao, just on a much more complicated level, so that's where he gets his information."

"Those are computing definitions," says Art.

"They are."

"That's not what I'm asking. How do you collect the data?"

"I do my own private investigation, but most of it's from Mao."

"And Mao...?"

"Mao," says Nice, "has his Minimum."

Of course. It always comes back to the Minimum; Art wonders how such a power is still kept secret from the rest of society.

Art takes a sip of coffee. The sound of rain against the window intensifies as the skies release their payload. Soon, Art can't even see the street beyond the diffused headlamps of cars driving by.

Art's coffee is cooling. It's almost too sweet now, so he drinks it all.

"What is it?" he asks.

"A secret."

"A secret?" "After everything else Nice has said?

"It just speeds up our ability to gather data. He's helped us a lot, so it's not my place to tell."

"Then would you know anything about the leak in our forces?"

Nice closes his eyes. It's only because Art's checking the time that he knows twenty seconds pass before the eyes open. They're blank, pupils reflecting gold from the lights above, looking at Art but not seeing him.

Then Nice downs the last of his milk, and his eyes return to normal.

"No," he says. "Mao doesn't like gathering police information, so none of the data I have is conclusive. Is that a request you want me to take?"

Art finishes the rest of the cake.

"I'm not sure what you mean," he says, cautious.

There's honest surprise; Nice's eyebrows shoot upwards. "You don't know?"

"Know what?"

"About Feng."

"Only that he's rumoured to work with Mao," admits Art. "And that Mao is the best at information gathering."

"Well then," says Nice. He leans forward, closing the distance as lovers share secrets, lips pulled apart in a smirk supremely smug. "There's one person in Yokohama that can find the unfindable."

"That would be you?"

Nice draws back. The smirk is still there. "That would be me."

"I see," says Art. "It was evident the moment you drew it out so dramatically."

"Come on, what do you want from me?"

"That should be obvious." Art glances at the window; the clouds have moved, and the rain has let up, briefly. "More than an hour and forty minutes have passed. We have both finished eating. Were you intending on leaving me here or walking back?"

"In the mood to walk?"

"All I would like is the victim's ID."

"Man," says Nice. "You're a tough crowd. Okay, Mr. I-Didn't-Bring-My-Umbrella, I'll walk you back and give you the guy's ID once we get there. Let's go."

Art isn't given any more warning; by the time Nice finishes speaking, he's already up and out of his chair. Art follows, stopping once to pay for his food but receiving the shake of a head in response. At some point, Nice has handled both payments already.

By the time Art reaches the door, Nice is waiting. He's spinning his umbrella lazily in the air and on the tail end of a phone call.

"_I know, I know_, " says Nice. He isn't speaking in Japanese. "_Got it. He's here, talk to you later._"

Nice hangs up.

"That was..." begins Art.

"Chinese," says Nice. The phone is put into his pocket; then the umbrella springs open as it's unfurled, sending stray water droplets landing in the doorway. He gestures for Art to join him, and Art does. "Didn't you learn it?"

"Yes," Art replies automatically. "It was my third language."

"Same here."

And without anything else said, they step out onto the sidewalk together.

* * *

><p>"So," says Nice, a little more than ten minutes into their journey, "did you want me to investigate?"</p>

"I'll consider it. However..."

"What's up?"

"Please do not pull any of your stunts again. Next time, I may seriously have to arrest you."

Nice looks at him blankly. "For what?"

"Breaking into headquarters, breaking into my apartment, suppression of evidence..." The confusion is still there. Art feels his own expression slowly mirroring him. "Haven't you learnt it? The legal codes are required reading at Facultas."

There's a long silence. Nice is forced to look away when he nearly walks into a tree.

"...Right," says Nice. "But I had reasons."

He says the words so earnestly that he's convinced they're enough to keep him out of trouble. Perhaps it's that earnestness that prompts Art to reply.

"Are they justifiable grounds?"

"They were emergencies, weren't they? I was trying to save your life, for one, and I didn't know how long it would take to get the evidence to eitherâ€" "

"The stopwatch?"

"Yeah."

Art remembers the report he'd been reading in the car before Nice had appeared. The gears click into position.

"That wouldn't have anything to do with the unpaid loans Tachikawa had with Miraki Lending, would it?" asks Art.

"Sharp," says Nice. "It may have contributed. I didn't manage to thank you for arresting him, so thanks for that. Good thing Hajime probably wanted to pay you back for that too... I don't think she was scheduled to visit Sato until a few days later. By the way, do you own earplugs? Damaged hearing never heals."

"I do, but had no opportunity to wear them," is Art's reply to the remark about earplugs — he's adjusting slightly better to Nice's leaps of logic, as abrupt as they are. "Thank you for the evidence. Please use official channels in the future."

"Sure, sure."

Nice stretches his free hand past the umbrella's shadow to check the rainfall, then whips the umbrella around before pulling it closed. The rain's stopped, though grey clouds haven't vanished entirely, and clouds even darker are positioned ready to roll in.

In the calm before the storm, Nice is humming.

"Mind if I borrow your brain for a bit?" he asks, a while later.

"Borrow..." echoes Art. "Pardon?"

Nice smiles.

"Just a little theoretical experiment, that's all," the reply. "And then, I'd like to make you an offer."

* * *

><p>Chinen Ayami used the Metal-Force Minimum when trying to take Art's life.</p>

Chinen Ayami isn't in the directory of Minimum Holders, and has never attended either Facultas.

It had been nothing but gut feeling when he'd checked the directory after Art'd left with Feng. And whilst it's true that the Minimum Agency could not possibly know every single Holder until they made themselves known, despite having several divisions dedicated to the discovery and recording of stray Holders in Japan, Gasquet's gut tells him there's something he's missing.

When Gasquet receives word that the search of her residence has been completed, and an officer is waiting to report, he neatly marks the page he's reading into memory and heads for his office immediately.

Multiple instances of the same Minimum are rare, but not impossible. Gasquet'd returned to the archives to cross-reference the directory and make notes of all duplications. Gasquet leafs through the notes as the elevator rises high into the sky.

"Sir," says the detective assigned. They exchange greetings. Then, she delivers her report and a summary before being excused.

Gasquet had been absently adjusting the frame on his desk with one hand, reading the report with the other, when a certain line catches

his attention. Chinen Ayami's parents had tried enrolling her in Facultas at a young age, but she had been refused. It's only because Gasquet knows about the secret of the Minimum that he understands the implications: _Chinen Ayami never possessed the Minimum Factor._

The frame shudders, tips forward, and lies still.

"Then how does she have a Minimum..." Gasquet murmurs. He stands the frame again. A younger version of himself and a pale woman in a hospital bed â€“ sickly but smiling â€“ look back toward him. The ghost of Ratio from fifteen years ago is reflected off metal bars, in the process of taking the photo. "Miwako, do you think it's possible...?"

A presence in front of his desk pulls him out of his thoughts. It's Art, slightly rained upon but returned within the promised time.

"Mr. Gasquet?" he asks.

"Welcome back," says Gasquet. "How'd it go?"

"It was... alright."

"Did he give us a name?"

"He â€“ he did. Actually," says Art, "I was hoping if... are you busy?"

Gasquet closes the report. "Not at all. What's up?"

"Nothing much. I just want to ask you something."

"Ask away."

Art cocks his head aside. "Let's go somewhere else first."

It's easily that Gasquet agrees. What isn't as easy is recognising Art's gait when he follows; he walks with a little more shoulders and a greater twitchiness in his hands. Whatever Art has on his mind has affected him greatly.

Fortunately the rain has stopped enough that neither of them need umbrellas, though only Art has one.

They leave the building and head down the street. There's a direction to Art's strides that suggests he isn't aimless, so Gasquet quells his surprise. A few turns later, they arrive at a small park, where metal play equipment grows from a ground of loose gravel. On sunny days it would be a haven for children, bubbling with laughter and full of life. Today, cast upon a backdrop of grey, bright paints die to dull. Thick globules of water cling to every surface, promising wet hands and soaked clothes. After the rain, reluctance proliferates and hesitation keeps people away.

Art walks to the swing set. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a white handkerchief before wiping one of the units dry. When he takes a seat, the chains jingle, and a few drops of water fall from the bar overhead to land in his hair.

They're ignored.

Art offers the handkerchief to Gasquet. Gasquet shakes his head and chooses to stand on a reasonably dry patch of ground next to him.

"What a day to come out here," he remarks, and whistles.

"Yes," says Art. "Don't you think it's beautiful?"

Gasquet can't help but chortle. "Beautiful? Your shoes are being ruined."

The ground beneath the swings is mostly mud, save for a thin rubber mat for traction. Art looks down as if realising for the first time, then smiles.

"Ah," says Art. "They are."

Gasquet laughs.

"So?" asks Gasquet, once he's managed to calm down. "What was it you wanted to ask?"

At first, Art doesn't answer. He tentatively pushes against the ground, only for the chain to squeak above him. The swing's clearly not intended for use by a person of his size.

Then Art turns to look at him, and Gasquet finds himself hypnotised by that gaze of piercing purple.

"If you could become a Minimum Holder," he says, "what would you choose to do?"

* * *

><p>06: mirror, mirror

/TBC/

8. 07

There's a sudden stillness in the air, and Gasquet tastes it. It tastes of cold, and wet, after-shadows of rain which has passed and gone. Perhaps there had been traffic rushing in the distance before Art had spoken, but there's nothing now. The only sound that remains is the swell of each breath that pass half-open lips, echoing between his ears. It's loud.

Too loud, in the bubble of silence where only he and Art remain.

If you could become a Minimum Holder, what would you choose to do?

"Did something happen?" says Gasquet.

Art breaks eye-contact and wraps an arm around one of the swing's chains. He leans into the hold.

"Not really," he says. "Maybe I should ask you. Did you figure something out, Mr. Gasquet?"

"The report for the search of Chinen's house came in. They found correspondence about a rejection from Facultas."

"Oh?"

"So she has a Minimum despite never showing its potential."

Art peers up at him curiously, head tilted to one side. It's probably intended as silent encouragement to continue, but to Gasquet, the oddity of the situation settles in instead. Art's on a swing. A black umbrella hangs off one arm. The park has just been rained on. His shoes are covered with mud.

It's definitely not where Gasquet'd expected to find himself when he offered his support. Still, he remembers they're not in the office and they're out in the open, and puts all thoughts of the case aside for when they return.

Art had brought him out, which means that Art needs him.

"Why are you thinking about being a Holder all of a sudden?" says Gasquet.

"Consider it a bit of a... theoretical experiment, Mr. Gasquet," Art replies. "If you could become one, would you? Wouldn't it be useful if you could, say, touch an object and determine all of its properties just by fulfilling some trivial activation condition? Or, be granted with the ability to entrap a suspect without even closing the distance?"

"I... suppose it would be."

"Then would you want to be one?"

"When you ask something in that way, why would anyone not want to?"

"Mmm."

Art reaches into his jacket for a small black box. The action is strange. Gasquet's gut twists, uneasy. He doesn't know why. Everything is normal and nothing has changed.

There are no reasons why.

[_â€" wrâ€"_]

One chocolate is taken. The rest are offered to Gasquet. A smile.
"Would you like one?"

The action brings the umbrella on Art's arm closer. It's wet, having been recently been used. The chocolates are ignored.

"Did he give that to you?" says Gasquet.

Art blinks. "Sorry?"

"That umbrella. Yours has a straight handle, if I recall."

"I didn't think you'd notice," says Art. "Very observant, Mr. Gasquet."

Gasquet's gut relaxes briefly, though the unease is not entirely gone. "I'm aware he's helped us before," he says, "but would you mind getting it inspected before you use it?"

"Inspected? Why?"

Because I don't trust him with your life, thinks Gasquet, remembering the man and his parasitic smile. "I don't think he's who he seems to be."

"Of course not," says Art. "After all, he's Nice-kun."

"Nice?"

"Nice."

"It'd help if you explain what I'm missing here."

"There is nothing to miss, Mr. Gasquet," says Art. "Nice is nice. That is who he is and will always be. Do you... not like him? Nice-kun?"

Despite the fact that Art is sitting on a swing too low to the ground, and Gasquet is standing beside him, Art's stare is so intense that an invisible hand commands Gasquet to bow down. Eye-level is not enough. The only acceptable answer is to prostrate himself against the ground, dogeza.

Gasquet's stomach curls.

"...Art," says Gasquet. "What did Feng say to you?"

"That's right, that is what he is calling himself now," comments Art. The pressure lifts briefly when Art looks away, but returns when he glances back. "Perhaps I should rephrase my question, then, Mr. Gasquet: do you not like Feng?"

"Heâ€"" The words catch in Gasquet's throat. "Hasn't earnt my respect."

"Oh," the reply.

The box of chocolates is closed; elegant fingers linger upon its edge. As Art rises to his feet, the wind picks up in unison, and the backwards roll of his neck and shoulders is at once like a cat uncurling from deepest sleep and the dance of ancient magic summoning storm clouds ever darker â€" controlling even the will of Nature herself, the awakening of not a god, but a force beyond even the gods' comprehension.

[_â€"wrong..._]

He stares up at the sky. "Mr. Gasquet?"

"Yes?"

"You know... I don't really care about you."

Time stops. _Freeze._

Gasquet forces up from his lungs a choking laugh. "Hey, Art, even you should know that kind of thing isn't funny."

"But it's true. I don't care."

"Artâ€" "

"No," says Art, and he turns around. There's nothing on his face except disdain and an unsatisfied frown. The pieces click into place: _this_ is why they're not back at the office.

This is the conversation which Art has been fighting.

And Art is not joking.

"I never needed you, Mr. Gasquet," Art says. "Ever, if at all."

Liar, thinks Gasquet. One of his clearest memories is of their fourth case together, but the first with the sickening scent of death and a decomposing body present at the scene. Art had conducted himself professionally despite a voice faintly quavering, and Gasquet'd spotted for him whilst he was throwing up after.

So many times over the past three years did Art drop his guard and smile that â€“ _what is there to doubt?_ Art's always needed him. But something's changed.

That is what he is calling himself now.

"You've known Feng before," says Gasquet.

Art perks up, beams. "Of course!"

"Did he make you do this?"

"Do what?"

"Try and split us apart."

There's a pause. Art stares at him, disbelieving. The silence stretches for so long that the dreadful whispers of doubt start seeping through cracks and into Gasquet's skin. Art really didn't care about him. Art's just been acting all along, in order to use him. _Art_â€"

Gasquet unconsciously begins to finger the bulb at the end of his cane.

[_listen_]

He doesn't expect Art to walk over, nor the arms which reach out and wrap around his shoulders. It's the first time Art's ever initiated any kind of physical contact. The hug is warm. Soft hair caresses

Gasquet's cheek. Art smells of flowers.

Fingers creep up to Gasquet's neck, tapping idly. Gasquet feels the movement of his chest when Art sighs.

"Oh, Mr. Gasquet," Art breathes in his ear. "I pity you, you know."

"You, Art?" says Gasquet. "Pity?"

"There is so much in this world you still do not understand."

"Art, what the hell are youâ€""

"Shame. I suppose I won't be doing you a favour after all."

It's too late when the point of a needle touches the side of Gasquet's neck, where the fingers had once been searching for his pulse â€“ and below that, his veins. There's no time to do anything before the needle breaches his skin, and Gasquet has no doubt that the jolts of frost diving across his nerves are a result of some injection, amidst the blazing pain of penetration and betrayal.

Threat.

Nothing but sheer adrenaline and the muscle memory of training allows Gasquet to throw Art off his shoulders and pin him to the ground. It had been a syringe. Gasquet twists the arm back, forcing the hand to let go of the device. The syringe's plunger is half-depressed. Its missing contents are swimming within Gasquet's body.

Art coughs from a face full of gravel and water. The ground is wet. His umbrella lies a few metres away.

Now that his facial features are obscured, Gasquet once again notices all the wrong body language he'd dismissed before, and his gut finally offers its reason.

[_Minimum._]

Gasquet's transported to a time when he'd still been a part of the military, and remembers one of many field exercises overseen by great Mt. Fuji. A simulated battlefield of few trees and sparse bushland, where the only protection a person had was their intuition and training against shadows that weren't shadows butâ€"

Enemy units in camouflage gear.

Keenly aware he had at most a minute, perhaps, to live, Gasquet shifts his grip and body weight so that he could keep his captive restrained with one arm. His free hand scrambles for his phone.

Art is first on his speed dial.

Gasquet doesn't wait for the call to be answered. "Who are you?" he says, down to his captive.

No answer. The ringback tone stops trilling; the call is in session. Art will hear their exchange, and Art will know there's been

trouble.

The skies begin to darken.

"You aren't Art," says Gasquet. "Who are you? What do youâ€" "

Gasquet's phone slips from his fingers and drops to the ground. It occurs to him that it's not the skies which are darkening but his own vision, heavy curtains drawn over parts of his mind and parts of his body.

One by one, his limbs shut down. The skies rise further away, and nothing but terror and a fading heartbeat accompanies him in freefall. He tries to get up. None of his limbs obey him. Gasquet's a rapidly shrinking bubble of panic tied to a doll's body that he can't control.

It's too easy for the fake Art to set himself free. He wipes across his cheeks with the back of a sleeve, and the resulting trail of dirt slices his face into the two people who make up his expression: Art's polite smile, and a madman's crazed, unblinking stare.

He walks over to the phone, picks it up, and disconnects the call.

"How troublesome," says the fake Art. "Fortunately we have the Minimum. And here I'd thought you'd be a worthy one for our world."

[_Our?_]

Images flash; life as a demo reel. Behind them, to Gasquet, the fake Art is no longer alone. Next to him is Feng, beneath a second black umbrella.

The same umbrella Feng'd held before â€" when he'd taken the real Art away.

I have some information about this morning's incident you might like. Are you free?

Feng knew the identity of a victim yet to be identified beyond a head sawed open; a victim of the Minimum Holder serial killer.

How long are we talking about?

Two to three hours. More than enough for a fake to take his place.

â€"More than enough to keep the real Art away.

A final burst of energy rushes through a fading consciousness, a sharp murmur of realisation, a last gift to a dying man.

"Then," Gasquet rasps, "getting close to Art..."

The last thing Gasquet sees is Art crouching down toward him, head wreathed in white light illuminated by the sun. His expression is angelic, radiant, carrying the comforting warmth of a thousand

blankets slowly bestowing smothering sleep.

The last thing Gasquet feels is a hand running through his hair, tucking stray strands lovingly behind one ear. He tastes the bitterness of rainwater mixed with dirt, a final cocktail adorned with the scent of sweet nectar, saluting departure.

The last thing Gasquet hears is a congratulatory whisper. "Well done." _Thanks for your work._

â€"and he replies,_ You're welcome._

* * *

><p>07: liar [_**crier **_**]**

* * *

><p>The unnatural stillness vanishes, and the traffic on the roads return to normal. People along the street materialise back into existence, conducting their daily lives, oblivious to the death which has just occurred.<p>

A slow clapping follows.

Momoka stands up from a stool which had been her seat in the gallery, and walks toward the swings. The rain begins to pick up again as new clouds begin rolling their way back in. Momoka's protected from the weather by an umbrella, and she's wearing her florist's gear.

"Oh, nice show," she says.

If Moral recognises the compliment, his disguise gives no indication of it. He pockets the phone still in his hand. The expression on Superintendent Art's face is genuine enough to be considered mournful.

There's no satisfaction without the sight of bullets in slow motion, without blood, and without a beloved golden revolver.

Moral fingers the peace symbol at the body's neck, then snaps the cord keeping it attached. He fetches his own umbrella and stands up again, idly examining the necklace hanging from his hand. Then, the necklace is tucked into the same pocket the phone is in, and the umbrella is flicked open.

"I was afraid you wouldn't be able to view it properly," Moral replies.

There's a movement from the bar which fences the swings.

"You saying I can't handle this Minimum?" says the teenager sitting on it. He's wearing a clear raincoat over a teal uniform, and a scowl that could cleave a melon in two. His complexion is very pale, and slightly green.

"Of course not, Kojima," says Moral. "The Moment Minimum really is exquisite... trapping two targets in an instance, preventing awareness of the outside world, and withholding their words from those outside save for a designated spectator â€" to master it so

well in such a short amount of time makes me glad I chose you."

Kojima's eyes flash between Moral and Momoka quickly. "Cool. So I can go now, right? You don't need me any more, boss?"

"Go ahead," says Moral. "Make sure you get that revenge you wanted, okay?"

"Hah. That Theo won't know what hit him."

And with those parting words, Kojima picks himself up before running away.

Momoka circles around the body on the ground, staring. There's no doubt she's arranged for a fake ambulance to be on its way.

"I hope you're aware how difficult it is to dispose of these," says Momoka.

"Thank you very much for all your assistance."

"It's no trouble." She looks up, then gestures across her nose. "You have some mud here."

More than that, Moral thinks, because there's so much water sogging up his clothes that he may as well have cannonballed into a swimming pool. The result of slight overconfidence, but nothing too dreadful — he'll simply need to obtain more rapid means of killing in the future.

He dips his umbrella to hide his face. It's raised again by a second Gasquet a moment later; Minimum re-activation is enough to withhold any damage to his image from perceptions other than his own.

Moral looks forward to a very long, very hot bath once he gets home. Maybe even scented. Shame Nice wouldn't be there with him. The black cosmos are in bloom.

"I assume you're tying up his loose ends?" says Momoka.

"In part, yes."

"Well, Greenland is quite the cool destination this time of year."

"...After all of Mao's help ensuring this disguise is impenetrable?" asks Moral. "I have a better idea. A game in which the cat is searching for its mouse, never knowing the mouse is actually the lion directly next door — wouldn't that be more fun than simply ignoring who it is that Nice has latched onto so closely?"

"That could potentially mean a long time undercover. You'll put the plans for your new world on hold?"

"Not on hold, never for Nice," says Moral. "Simply...
slowed."

Momoka looks down to the body, then up to Moral's appearance again. "In any case, I look forward to it. Make sure you stay..."

entertaining."

* * *

><p>"Thanks for your input," says Nice.</p>

His so-called 'theoretical experiment' has left Art both frowning and convinced that Nice lives his life determined to be confusing. By the time Art spots the police building approaching over the nearby rooftops, he realises that, at least for a moment, he'd also forgotten the reason for his excursion entirely.

Disappointing.

Art checks his watch. It's pushing nearly three hours since he's left. He also checks his phone; Gasquet'd called earlier, but there had only been silence across the line until Gasquet'd hung up. Pocket dialling, Nice had suggested.

If it's urgent, Gasquet will call him again.

"Is that all?" Art asks.

"Pretty much, yeah," says Nice. "Okay. Your guy is one James Shunsuke."

Art reaches into his pocket for a notepad. "James..."

"Shunsuke. _Cheek bone._ Twenty-nine, film maker, that's all I've got on him for now."

The characters are written down. "Thank you," says Art. "Again, please do make sure you don't do this in the future, Nice. Next time you'll definitely be charged with suppressing evidence, alright?"

There's no reply. It's not raining enough for the umbrella to be necessary, so it takes a moment before Art realises that Nice is no longer walking next to him; he'd stopped a few steps away.

"...Nice?"

"Y-yeah," says Nice. He quickly closes the distance between them.
"Yeah. Sure."

Art watches him. Nice raises an arm to scratch behind an ear. He isn't wearing his earphones; It's the first time Art notices they're missing.

"Is everything alright?" says Art.

"Yeah. I'm just â€“ I was just surprised."

"By what?"

"The way you say my name, I guess."

"Nice?" repeats Art, concentrating. "Nice... no, I don't quite hear anything."

Nice shrugs.

"It's probably just because you haven't used it before. Anyway, want to do this again?" he adds, very obviously changing the subject. Art opens his mouth; Nice hurriedly waves his arms, anticipating Art's comment that Nice had just agreed otherwise. "No, no, I mean, the whole meeting up thing but not to do with your work. We can discuss things."

"Discuss...?"

"...Cases? Uh. Wait, I meanâ€" "

Nice is very quickly interrupted when it begins to rain, very heavily and all at once, completely out of nowhere. He fumbles with his umbrella for a second, but even that is a second too long. Art chooses to run to the safety of the nearest shelter instead.

By the time he's joined by Nice, Art's fringe is stuck to his forehead. He's sure the rest of his hair is equally as drowned-cat â€“ until the umbrella lifts enough to reveal Nice's head. Half of Nice's hair is torn between drooping, the other half valiantly attempts to stay up against Nature's will, and all of it convinces Art that his own hair is fine.

Nice had actually lifted the umbrella to look at the sky. He deadpans. "What."

A large raindrop chooses that moment to trickle out of Nice's hair, down his brow, then slide off his nose. The absurdity of the entire situation has Art stifle a chuckle.

"You don't look any better," Nice tells him.

"I wonder if you can make that comment after you've seen yourself first," Art replies. "There's nothing reflective here, unless you'd rather continue walking...?"

They take fifteen steps until they reach a glass-walled shopfront, entirely uninterested in the products being sold, staring at nothing but their reflections.

"...Okay," says Nice. "You win, Superintendent. Until next time. So, you in?"

"In what?"

"Meeting again later. This was my offer. Forget what I said earlier. You get to pick what time and whatever, and I'll give you info and stuff in return."

"And Mao won't mind?"

"Mao..." Nice pauses. "Mao's cool. But you're fun. He'll understand."

It occurs to Art that there is a person Nice doesn't mention as often.

"What about Hajime?" asks Art.

"What about her?" says Nice. "I don't bother her much. She does her own thing. What do you think?"

"I'll have to think about it."

"No problem."

Nice stops and holds the umbrella's handle toward Art. The two of them are under an overhang, so there's no risk of being rained on, but it's the last overhang until the police building's front doors.

"Here," says Nice. "You'll need it."

Art stares. "You aren't coming?"

"...No. I don't want to be picked up on camera."

"There are cameras here."

"It's different," Nice replies. "I'd give you my number, but I change it every month, so can I have yours?"

"Why?"

"I was thinking of calling you so you know where to find me. It's easier if you know you gave it." "oh, forget it."

Nice pulls out a mobile phone. He inputs a string of numbers that Art knows very well, and within moments Art's own phone begins to ring.

"Where did you?" says Art.

"I copied your business card," says Nice, and hangs up so that his number is in Art's system.

"I really should arrest you."

"The more you say that, the more I don't believe you're going to do it."

"Would you like to try, Nice?"

"...Sorry."

Nice glances away and scratches his cheek; Art finds himself surprised. Nice had sounded sorry, a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Is there anything else I should know?" asks Art.

There's an uncomfortably long pause.

"Nice?"

"Okay, okay. I... looked you up two years ago."

"Two years...?"

"I might have followed you for like a week."

Art clenches his fists. Arresting becomes the last thought in his mind; it takes a surprising amount of self-restraint not to punch Nice there and then. "_What?_"

"Were you at Facultas before Skill, and left after?" Nice asks.

"That's irrelevant."

"No, it's not," says Nice. The umbrella is dropped, he leans against it, and spins to look at Art. There's a force in that gaze that snatches Art's comments from his lips, and Nice's presence grows larger; he is the man who dictates, and Art's only role is to listen. "I entered in the same year as Skill, and left at the same time. Back then, I memorised every blueprint, every schedule, every data point, and the habits of every person at Facultas to the point where I could predict with eighty-seven percent accuracy a student's grades before they even took a class or sat an exam. Everyone during the time period I attended â€“ except you."

"You..."

"Didn't I say?" Nice gives Art a lopsided smile. It's a smile that's eating his face alive. "I was a special case. I never saw an 'Art' until he became Superintendent two years ago. Of course, when I found he graduated from Facultas, I knew I had to look into who he was and why his identity was kept from me. It turns out I only knew the students that had a Minimum."

"Yet you knew Skill," says Art.

"I didn't," says Nice. "He died before they found it. I didn't know he existed until I researched you."

Art realises he's forgotten to breathe. He reminds himself to breathe some more.

"I find all of that hard to believe," he says.

Is it his imagination when Nice flinches?

"What?" says Nice.

"It's impossible. Facultas is too under-funded for any special streams. It's impossible to create such accurate models without an Analysis Minimum. It's also impossible to finish learning two natural languages given the Academy's workload without having completed the final four yearsâ€" "

"Three languages."

"Three?"

"You forgot the first-year mandatory. English."

"Exactly my point," says Art, thinking '_three?_' when only two are

part of the curriculum. "Furthermore, everybody at Facultas knew of me." It's hard to go unnoticed in a world of Minimum without one of his own. "I should arrest you right now."

"So you believed I stalked you, but you don't believe everything else?" asks Nice.

"I'm not sure what I believe."

Nice closes his eyes. He stills. He takes a deep breath. It's a breath so deep his lungs should not be able to contain it within their confines.

"Fine," he says. "Okay. That's fine. I won't call or bother you again. You can keep my number, it's still useful for a few more weeks. And here," Nice extends the umbrella. "You can have this, too."

"Niceâ€" "

Nice's expression is hard. He puts on his earphones. "You need it more. I take it by how you'd used 'should' that you aren't going to arrest me today?"

"...I'm not."

A silent nod. "Thanks. Goodbye."

Art had been concentrating for a Minimum's activation. He receives a blindingly intense rainbow of light for his efforts; the brightest activation he's ever seen. By the time his vision returns to normal, there's nothing but empty air.

It's easier to convince himself that Nice hadn't flinched, than it is to convince himself that Nice's eyes were only reflecting the falling rain.

* * *

><p>By the time Art returns, Gasquet is gone.</p>

He'd checked the archives, first, as that's where his partner had said he'd be, but it's unsurprising when they're empty. Gasquet, too, is not in either of their offices, nor is he in the foyer, nor the smokeroom. Searching anywhere more than that in such a large building is a waste of time when the only thing he wants to do is apologise for being tardy.

Art chooses to skip lunch and heads to his office to get some work done instead. There's a note beneath Inspector Nagaki's report on the crime scene.

Art,

Won't be here, looking into a lead. Text, don't call.

Chinen's report came in. There was nothing to suggest her motive was anything other than revenge. Nothing suspicious was found at her place either.

_Don't worry, concentrate on the current case _â€“ _I filed it for you._

â€“ _Gasquet_

Art smiles. He sends a text to Gasquet with James Shunsuke as the victim's name, a thank you message for his consideration, and wishes of luck on his lead. He then closes his eyes and takes a deep breath, willing himself to forget all the memories he has of Nice and their conversations, andâ€“

After almost four hours, when Art finally rises for a break, he sees the missed call in his phone history and ignores it, despite the shadow of a memory making itself known â€“

[Harm to you is the last thing I have in mind.]

It's Nice's number.

Art won't be needing it.

Nice is a mystery who Art will never meet again.

* * *

><p>TBC/**

9. 08

Birthday does several things upon waking up each day. The first is checking his phone for messages, hoping a cute girl had texted him in the night. The second is being disappointed that he'd gotten no texts. Ratio greets Birthday at that point, and then moments later Birthday would have brushed his teeth (doctor's orders) before going in search of food. If he hadn't any plans, he'd also go searching for something to amuse himself with for the rest of the day.

Today, Birthday wasn't greeted by the real Ratio, only the Ratio in his wallpaper â€“ a photo taken about a week ago, after Ratio'd fallen asleep at his desk, with stray inky lines doodled on his face from a pen pointed at his cheek. The real Ratio'd gone ahead, taken an earlier shift. He'd be working extra hours to make up for the yesterday he'd skipped, when they'd gone in search of Feng.

It won't be evening until Ratio's set to return.

Birthday sighs. It's cold.

Birthday curls his toes and shivers. He's cold.

Crouched in front of the refrigerator, still in his pyjamas, Birthday sneezes. His stomach growls, so loud it drowns out the sound of rain rat-tat-tatting against their windows; he'd overslept, so he's hungrier than usual.

Also, he's really, really cold.

The refrigerator is closed as Birthday gives up on his search, and

then proceeds to go hunting for a toaster that's strangely missing. He doesn't get far before there's a rattling of keys at the front door."

"Eh?" says Birthday. He cranes his head back out of the corridor to check the time, then looks back to Ratio again. It's not even noon. "Back so soon?"

At first, there's no reply. Ratio closes the door behind him, drops his keys in one of the endless pockets of his lab coat, then places the tablet aside before hanging his umbrella on the wall. There's one last thing removed before Ratio gets to slipping off his shoes.

Birthday stares at the eyepatch dumbly. Then, he looks at Ratio and his eyes.

Both of Ratio's eyes.

"Ratio...?" begins Birthday.

Ratio tosses the eyepatch to him. Ratio's not used to seeing with two eyes again; it flies wide, Birthday scrambles for it, fumbles the catch. The eyepatch slips through his fingers and lands lifelessly against the floor.

Seeing Ratio without a shadow eating half his face away is like meeting a version of Ratio taken straight from high school. Younger. Bizarre. Without the eyepatch, the symmetry is uncannily perfect, the flipping of half an image to make something whole.

Ratio's staring back at Birthday. He doesn't flinch, not even once.

"It's gone," says Ratio, in a voice uncomfortably small. "The Minimum. The curse is gone."

* * *

><p>Nice stares at the sky.</p>

His phone rings. Three people have his number. One won't be calling him back.

The call is ignored.

Nice doesn't know how long he's been standing, watching through the downpour. There's a sharp wind cutting over water and deep into drenched clothes. His feet had taken him left from the station rather than the right toward Chinatown, even though Yamashita Park is the last place where anyone wants to be in the rain; it's all grass, the occasional tree, and no shelter. Those unlucky enough to be sightseeing have retreated to the shelter of the rest house nearby, so Nice is alone and watching stormy grey clouds press down on Yokohama Bay.

Cumulonimbus clouds, formed in unstable areas of the

atmosphere.

Nice remembers the book; 102. Paper 102 was one of many investigating the cause of the Minimum, but the first to provide evidence against mutations in a person's DNA. It compared samples from a subject who had come into the Minimum as an adult, after showing no signs of actualising one at a younger age; designation: Three. Three corridors lead out from his room at Facultas, door 117 to his left. Paper 117 was first to present findings on an individual's personal development related to the development of their Minimumâ€"

A shadow falls over him. A hand drops onto his shoulder.

"Little Nice," says Mao, from behind, "what am I going to do with you?"

Nice blinks. All stray thoughts vanish, disappearing from consciousness as pigeons return to holsters up a magician's sleeve. Water no longer falls into his face; there's an umbrella shielding him from the rain.

Nice turns around. "You're back?"

"I am," says Mao. "I found the information you wanted."

"Thanks. I'll check my mail later. Cipher?"

"Three-two. The wisest man is the fool in brightest motley."

Nice laughs.

"They're worthy fools because of the best plaid, huh?"

Mao is holding a towel, draped over the arm holding the fish bread he's in the middle of eating. Nice had seen the towel, but hadn't registered its presence until Mao extends it to him. The piece of fabric is soaked through by the time Nice dries off his face and hair.

Mao is peering intently at him when the towel is handed back, spectacles like magnifying glasses, examining Nice for damage.

Nice doesn't need to say anything because Mao already knows.

"He isn't worth you," says Mao.

I know, Nice wants to say, but he doesn't, because he doesn't know when he'd started to care.

"Tell me why," says Nice.

There's a brief pause; Mao takes another bite of the fish bread, chews contemplatively. "...No."

"Why not?"

"Because," says Mao, like it's an answer.

"That's not an answer!"

Mao smiles a soft smile reserved for Nice and no more. Mao reaches out, tucks some of Nice's hair behind his ear.

"Forget about him, little Nice," says Mao. "Let's get you out of those clothes â€“ there's work to do."

"I have a new job?"

"You do."

* * *

><p>08: motley fools moralising time

* * *

><p>"...This doesn't count as a job, Mao."<p>

"Don't be so narrow-minded, little Nice," is the reply through the earphones Nice is wearing. "It's unbecoming."

"_Look, it's that mascot!_"

"_Ah, Toranker!_"

Toranker spots the two easily before jumping up and down, gesturing in welcome. It's a mother and daughter duo from out of town; a tourist brochure from Shin-Yokohama Station protrudes from the mother's handbag, the daughter's wide-eyed hurry is characteristic of a child that has never met Toranker before. Toranker gestures, the girl hops up next to him, and then the sliding of virtual shutters and artificial shutter-sounds begin.

Neither the mother nor the daughter ever notice Nice inside.

Nice poses obligingly for the photos, despite the suit's immobility. It's all exaggerated proportions and no real support save for a flimsy frame and as much stuffing as his mattress at home.

"Make sure you remember to promote," Mao had said, when they'd returned.

"What about you?" Nice's reply.

"The shop needs renovating."

Nice can't say anything to Mao when there are people so close, so he simply listens to the random thumps and idle humming, digitised by Mao's microphone and fed through the internet to the earphones in Nice's ears. Mao snickers suddenly for no reason at all; if Nice isn't so used to Mao's presence, the one-sided joke would be infuriating rather than comforting.

But it's not for Mao's own sake that he suggested the call.

"Come _on_, Mao," says Nice, once Toranker has waved its guests goodbye. "What _are_ you up to?"

"Don't take that step you're about to take," Mao warns.

Nice obeys. "Lemme see."

There's the sharp sound of something being dropped down.

"No," says Mao. "You're still not allowed to come in until I'm done."

"Control freak."

"...They're here."

Nice pays attention to his surroundings again; Toranker is being approached once more. This time it's a pair of children, a young girl escorting a boy, both thirteen. They're twins, with the same nose, similar brows, boring dark hair. The same blank gazes and smooth faces like puppet dolls, less human than human.

They draw to a stop in front of Nice and stare.

"Yun and Yang are coming," says Mao.

Nice sends a glance in the direction of the shop even as Toranker gives a wave. Obviously.

The girl, Yun, eyes the tiger mask warily like it's withholding sentience and will eat them alive. Yang reaches up toward Toranker's head; Toranker kneels, and Yang puts his hand over Toranker's nose. Not once does Yun let go of her brother's shoulder.

Yang licks his lips and blinks.

"...Mr. Nice is being dumb," he proclaims.

"Good afternoon to you too," says Nice. "You guys have school today."

"Uncle Mao said we should come."

"They're helping me with renovations," adds Mao.

Nice frowns. "So they're allowed to see what you're up to but not me? I turned seventeen a few months ago."

"It's got nothing to do with your birthday," says Mao. "I need them for their own talents. You should be using yours."

There's a small stand inside the Toranker mask, for putting Nice's phone. It has Mao's email open, the data Nice had asked for and more, encrypted into code. Nice glances at the screen and flicks his head; the sensor taped to his nose detects the movement, and the screen scrolls down. "My talent, huh?"

Mao pretends he hasn't heard.

"Tell the kids to use the back entrance," he says.

The message is passed on. Yun's grip tenses briefly on her brother's shoulder. She flickers her eyes; she would have nodded if she was capable of nodding. Yang nods for her and taps Toranker's nose twice.

"Getting better, Mr. Nice," says Yang.

With those words, their farewell is complete, and Yun helps to steer her brother to where the back entrance stands.

Nice watches them leave.

"Find yourself a girlfriend if you like kids so much," he says to Mao.

He hears Mao shrug. "I don't need a girlfriend when I've got you."

"...You knew exactly how that would sound."

"Maybe. Maybe not," replies Mao. "What if I said I liked Hajime?"

"Then it's up to her. Do you?"

"I don't."

"Good," says Nice. "Either way, if you break her heart, I'll kill you."

"If I did, you wouldn't be able to catch me."

"Even you have patterns."

"It's not about patterns. Don't forget that I know you better than anyone else in the world, little Nice. Including you."

The sound of a door opening screaks softly across the line.

"Mao?" says Nice. "Shut the fuck up."

Without another word, a gesture to the sensor disconnects the call. The little popup reporting call time is dismissed. Nice sighs, though it's with a wry smile. Just because Nice can't hear his partner doesn't mean it's the same for Mao.

A street full of people greet Toranker, and Mao's data greets Nice again: everything Nice had asked for, and then some.

Mao knows Nice better than Mao knows himself.

"Don't get such a big head, Mao," Nice says, knowing Mao will hear, whilst mentally partitioning some of the data into his brain. "It's unbecoming."

* * *

><p>If Mamiya is anything in this rotten world, he is good at his job.</p>

"Would you get some refreshments, Mamiya?"

"Of course, President."

If he is anything else, he is a good actor.

"Do you require help?"

"It's fine, Three."

But of all the things he could beâ€"

_ "Did you manage to get the position?"_

_ "I did. Okura was very impressed by my Minimum. But, Ishigami..."_

_ "I know."_

â€"Mamiya is loyal.

_ "...Affirmative. I'm sorry I doubted you."_

It's nothing but sheer loyalty to Freemum, its cause, and Ishigami and his dream, that keeps Mamiya from spilling the tray of refreshments all over Okura Yuichi and the clients sitting across from him. Mamiya bites the inside of his lip to prevent any animosity appearing on his features as he serves them. Twice his hair gets in the way of his vision, stabs him in his cheeks. Mamiya wishes he could wear his headband.

But Mamiya doesn't complain. Very few members of their family are in any condition to have a job, and money is the force of the universe, so Mamiya ought to remain silent and thankful. When Okura's business goes well, he pays well.

And when Okura's business is going well, he is usually using Mamiya's Minimum.

Okura had initiated a handshake with his clients after greeting them with the more traditional bow. Before the clients had then been escorted to the meeting room, Mamiya'd been sent a nod â€" bring those. Mamiya's speciality. So Mamiya isn't surprised when, as soon as the biscuits are politely tried, Okura's newest clients start dribbling over the floor in their desire for more. More bliss, more debt, more mess for Mamiya to clean up after contracts are penned and deals are done.

Mamiya spends the time avoiding eye-contact, staring silently at the painting on one wall. It's of a woman lost in an expanse of blue, white against a black tortoise and body entwined with an inky snake; an original, by some famous artist called Chiyuu.

The clients leave once they've signed their souls away.

"That's enough for today," says Okura. He grabs the jacket of his suit off Mamiya, who he'd given it to when the meeting began. The golden rings on his fingers clink as he puts the jacket back on.
"Ohâ€"Three?"

Three steps into the doorway of the meeting room, from where he'd been stationed outside. It's the only exit both in and out. The meeting room is second in regards to safety; the walls hide the fact they're built surrounding steel. Mamiya's never been allowed inside

Okura's office, the safest of them all.

Mamiya'd thought it was sheer paranoia until a sedan had crashed through the front of the building, sending glass shards and buckled steel all across the floor.

(He'd thought that was an accident, too, until the driver assaulted him the month after. A fine wasn't enough compensation for an Ishigami who'd witnessed one of his own attacked before his eyes; Mamiya had watched the water boiling in the bathtub, and heard the screams drawn out over the course of hours.)

"Yes, sir?" says Three.

"Has Hajime returned?" asks Okura.

"Hajime has not returned yet, sir."

Okura's adjusting his cuffs. He curls his fingers. Very slowly, very carefully. One at a time, all the way up to nine. Three doesn't react. Mamiya realises he hasn't seen Okura's second bodyguards for a long time.

They'd still be alive, if they were lucky.

"I see," says Okura. "Mamiya."

"Yes, President?"

"Wait for her until she returns."

Mamiya religiously follows the time. Being punctual is a duty, not a preference. The shop closes in eight minutes and he's scheduled to meet with the rest of the family after work. Cleaning the meeting room has been refined to an art; it takes Mamiya seven minutes, never more.

Mamiya will never be late unless Okura makes it so.

"But sirâ€"" says Mamiya.

He's cut off.

"Hajime's so cute!" says Okura. "I fear what could happen to her and her safety."

"There's no guarantee she'll be back."

"She'll be back," says Okura. "But if she doesn't... you'll just have to stay the whole night, no?"

"I can't do that, Presidentâ€""

"Of course, you'll be compensated generously."

Pause.

"...How much?" asks Mamiya.

Okura tells him.

When Okura and his dog close the front door behind them, Mamiya's mopping the floor and cursing down the ceiling.

Money is the force of the universe. The Freemum are in great need of money. But there will be enough in this one pay check for both their bills and rent and maybe, finally maybe, Mamiya will earn enough extra that they may focus on future goals. Expansion. Promotional material. Business cards. Time off, so that they may go recruiting. An opportunity for Ishigami's dream to touch those unaware.

The office has never been so clean by the time Hajime finally returns. She takes one look at Mamiya, wrestling aggressively with a stain that had been beneath a chair, blinks lazily, then takes another bite from the half-eaten hamburger in her hands " as if she hasn't arrived nearly an hour after closing, and Mamiya hasn't had time to eat since the morning.

"The President went home," Mamiya tells her, reluctantly. "Leave the money on my desk. I'll take care of it""

"James Shunsuke died."

Mamiya stiffens. "What?"

"He's the one I was collecting from?"

"Yes." Mamiya'd given her the details and James's address himself, as always. "Are you sure?"

"The police that wanted to question me were. Know him?"

"Do you care?"

"No," her flat reply.

"Then don't ask."

Hajime's moved behind Mamiya's desk, now. "Where is the first-aid kit?"

"You're injured?"

"I need a bandage for tomorrow."

The stab of fear from Okura's reaction were he to find out about any injury settles into relief, and then disgust at himself for even considering either possibility.

"Second drawer," says Mamiya.

Mamiya listens to her fumble with the handle's mechanism. He sighs.

"Need a hand?"

"No."

By the time she steps back from the desk, Mamiya's finished packing up the cleaning supplies, more than ready to go home. Mamiya looks at

Hajime but only sees the right side of her face, where a gauze square sits snug over her eye. She hadn't been wearing it the day before. Briefly, he wonders if eyepatches have become fashionable when he wasn't paying attention, or if she's walked into a fist or a wall.

Like she can sense his gaze, Hajime turns around.

"Are you done?" says Mamiya.

He doesn't ask about the eyepatch because he doesn't care.

Hajime tilts her head. "Only if you lock up. Don't bother escorting me."

Before Mamiya can get in another word, she's gone.

* * *

><p>"You're late, Mamiya!"</p>

Mamiya steps into the Freemums' private lounge and slams the door shut behind him. It silences Club Without's garish dance beats, seals the small room off from the lights and those who make up the rest of the world. The private lounge could be a diorama in a bottle for how little it changes despite how long passes and how many live within. It's rented from a supporter for cheap and the services of their various Minimums.

Mamiya flicks his head, props his headband against his ears, and smooths his hair down in one swift motion.

"I was kept back, Gouda," he says.

"Evidently."

Gouda's twirling a black wig on the end of a finger, leaning against the back of a sofa. She's changed into her regular clothes, the fast food chain's red uniform sitting by her feet in a plastic bag. Beside her, spindly Suzuki fiddles with her hat, inspecting it curiously. Sakuraba raises a hand in greeting before returning to his magazine, silent from habit rather than any preparation for his Minimum. Masumoto doesn't indicate any notice of Mamiya's presence, deep in meditation.

Only two people are still at the table. Suruga, who takes the longest to eat due to the gag sealing his Minimum, and Ishigami.

Ishigami looks up when Mamiya takes a seat across, and blinks when Mamiya extends a check to him.

"Mamiya?"

"My bonus."

Ishigami takes it and looks at the number. His eyes widen sharply in surprise. "_This_â€"

"For making sure his girl returned safely," says Mamiya.

"That much of a bonus just for today?" says Ishigami. "We've never gotten this much before. Did anything happen?"

Mamiya only allows himself half a second of hesitation.

"James is dead."

All noise draws to a sudden halt. Behind Mamiya, Sakuraba's magazine falls to the floor.

"I don't know the details." Mamiya speaks at the same level, because there's no need to raise his voice in a room where everyone is listening. "All I know is that the girl was supposed to be collecting from him but she got pulled into questioning. Okura wanted me to stay back and wait for her. That's what he gave me."

"He knew about James," says Gouda.

Ishigami looks to Mamiya. "Did he?"

"If he did, he didn't show it," says Mamiya. "Everything was normal. But Okura wouldn't do anything" James has never missed a payment, even if he was stupid enough to go to Miraki for his loan."

Mamiya doesn't mention how James hadn't had much of a choice, with rejections from banks and offers from sharks. Never let it be said that the Freemum only accepted those born and raised in Japan their entire lives.

"Then was the girl hiding something?" asks Gouda. "She does have that Sonic Minimumâ€" "

"Enough," says Ishigami. He sighs a heavy sigh. "Mamiya, you must be famished. Please, help yourself. Then we may discuss what is going on."

Mamiya obliges. Dinner consists of cup ramen and scavenged leftovers destined for the bin; extra fried chicken and chips from Gouda, salads and unsold goods from Ishigami. Use-by dates have no relevance to those with a miracle healer. Suruga is banned from eating anything that may even potentially be sickening, and Mamiya is banned from bringing any consumables at all. Maintaining their group's health and function is easier that way.

It is when Mamiya is halfway through his ramen that Suruga is finished and Ishigami decides the meeting may begin.

"As you've all no doubt heard," says Ishigami, "James is dead. He was a kind, venerable man with one of the most unique and valuable Minimums in existence, and his loss will be felt dearly. In honour of his memory, I would like all of us to refrain from speculation. We will do as we always do" collect information, and then find out the truth in due time. Let the past remain in the past, and let us look toward the tomorrow where Minimum Holders may be free."

Suzuki chitters.

"Our plans?" echoes Ishigami. "The same as they've always been. It will all depend upon the next actions of Facultas's Murasaki. Sakuraba, does he still have the card?"

Sakuraba shrugs. He signs with both hands. _It has not been thrown out._

"Excellent," says Ishigami. "We will wait for four more weeks to see if he takes action, planning accordingly."

"How can you be so confident that Murasaki will join us?" asks Mamiya.

"Because he is the same type of person as you." Ishigami grabs his cup, a flimsy plastic thing filled with too-sweet tea. "Now, let us toast. To a future where we are free!"

Half a dozen cups join his, thrust toward the sky.

"_A future where we are free!_"

* * *

><p>TBC/**

10. F3

â€"

Â« F3 Â»

â€"

* * *

><p>"You're going to die."<p>

Fifteen years ago, before Ratio is known as Ratio, Ratio is known as the child whose only friend is death.

He'd had other friends, once upon a time. Those friends had left him, one by one, either ordered by their parents or from his own distancing. The confusion had been worse than the fear: with fear, Ratio could be the villain; with confusion, Ratio would need an explanation.

What magic is a magic that can be explained?

* * *

><p>In hindsight, it's unsurprising that Ratio hadn't noticed the vehicle trying to turn into the street he'd been about to cross.<p>

Ratio would have walked into its path had it not been for the hand that settled atop his shoulder, jerking him out of his thoughts and anchoring him to reality.

Ratio will forget his name. Ratio will forget the names of those he'd called his friends, the friends who used to play with him in the park, the friends who hadn't turned up that day.

But Ratio will never forget the shadow of silver chrome, the heartbeat gripping his throat and crushing air from his lungs, and Ratio will never forget how his fingers quivered weakly in seconds that felt like minutes that felt like eternity.

Ratio won't ever forget the worried expression of the man that had saved him, nor " how behind him " there'd been a woman with an aura of acrid sick and vile vomit and giant glistening cockroach goo. They'd been saying something, but Ratio'd never heard. There's nothing to hear in a reality spinning, spinning, nearly spinning out of grasp and well away.

"You're going to die soon, miss," the prophet of death had said, despite nearly dying himself.

Ratio will never forget how the man's eyes had sharpened with determination after only the briefest instant of fear.

* * *

><p>The man's name is Gasquet and the woman's name Miwako.</p>

Ratio's first response had been curiosity.

Curiosity for this man called Gasquet, who'd immediately made several phone calls " voice commanding, intense, passionate, all whilst absently making motions as powerful as the furrow between his brows. He's the first person to not only listen but act, rather than simply dismissing a child's words, even though Ratio has no way to procure evidence to prove his curses come true.

There's a few hours before he's expected home, and Ratio's still reeling atop the edge " trying to comprehend the feebleness of his own mortality. Gasquet had saved him. Perhaps in other circumstances, his curiosity and desire to thank the man would not have won out over common sense and self-security.

In other circumstances, Ratio wouldn't have decided to follow them, and Ratio wouldn't have learnt the love and devotion a real friend should call their own.

* * *

><p>Miwako'd smiled, acquiesced indulgently in the face of Gasquet's insistences (Miwako, it's just a check-up, I can't help but worry), fielding his agitation with love and without condescending. Later, Ratio will learn that Miwako had been a teacher at a local preschool. Ratio watches the exchange between her and Gasquet, how they communicate thoughts with glances and small gestures. It echoes silent volumes about how long they've known one another, or the number of years she's spent dealing with little children.

Ratio's been following them for so long that he'd managed to convince himself that neither notice his presence there.

"At least, not until Miwako turns around to look at him, crouches so she is at eye-level, and says; "Haven't you learnt it's unwise to follow strangers, young man?"

(Gasquet, at least, jerks in surprise.)

"You two are dangerous people?" asks Ratio.

"What would you do if we said yes?"

"Be sad," says Ratio, looking down. "Mr. Gasquet saved me."

* * *

><p>The reply must have satisfied Miwako, somehow, because Ratio's next memory is that of waiting next to Gasquet. Perhaps they'd exchanged words. Ratio will never know.</p>

What Ratio does remember is Gasquet being called away, and the haunting gaze accompanying his return.

When Gasquet looks at him speechlessly, his eyes so wide the whites almost form two crescent moons, Ratio thinks: I'm right again. Soon, she will die.

* * *

><p>Cancer. Leukemia. Other explanations his youth rendered him unable to follow or remember, simply listened and nodded whenever necessary. The words washed past; procedures and statistics don't matter to a boy whose only statistic is absolute certainty.</p>

Ratio isn't sure at what point he'd hoped that Miwako would be the first to break the spell.

* * *

><p>Time becomes at once lightning fast and snail's-pace slow.</p>

Ratio still sits at the park, on days that feel like months, even though those he'd called his friends have long disappeared. Ratio amuses himself by watching the wind play with streamers and hair, eyeing sun-cast shadows shift over time, and following the trails of ants on their search for food and then back to their nest soon after.

One day, he finds one of the benches occupied by Gasquet. Ratio remembers the slump stretching from the man's feet, curving upwards to sturdy shoulders and dark hair. Gasquet's head is so low his ponytail points straight up into the air like an antenna. I'm not tired, not tired, says his body language; it's exhausting.

"Mr. Gasquet?" asks Ratio.

Gasquet's head snaps up so quickly it's a wonder it doesn't fly away. "Oh. Ratio, was it?"

(He'd used Ratio's old name, but Ratio can't remember.)

Ratio nods. Now that Gasquet's head is no longer in the way, Ratio can see two slips of paper in Gasquet's hands.

"What's that?" he asks.

"This?" Briefly, Gasquet glances toward them. "They're... tickets. To an opera, Kurofune â€“ 'The Black Ships'. It's about the story ofâ€" he pauses, "never mind. It probably wouldn't interest you anyway."

Gasquet's words are hitched and staggered, and Ratio doesn't know how to help him.

"I'm... interested," says Ratio.

A small, sad smile. Gasquet reaches out to ruffle Ratio's hair. It's an unfamiliar sensation, though not an unpleasant one.

"You're a good kid," he says.

"Mr. Gasquetâ€"

"Ah, don't call me that. Makes me feel old. 'Gasquet' is fine."

Gasquet will later tell Ratio that he'd looked like he'd just been told the sky was orange and everybody had been deceiving him. Ratio only remembers his throat had choked. Dropping the honorific...?

Why did it become so difficult to find words?

Ratio hesitates. He takes the easy way out of the problem. "How is...?"

"Miwako? She... her treatment might be making her worse. It's a struggle for her to get any meals down, and she can barely move. She keeps saying she'll make it, but..." Gasquet looks down at the tickets again. "To think we'd planned for a trip to Osaka..."

Ratio doesn't know how to answer. It's a long time before Gasquet blinks, then lifts an arm to check his watch.

"It's about time visiting hours open," he says. "Say, Ratio, want to come along?"

"Huh?"

"Miwako asks about you sometimes. We owe you a lot. It'll be a nice surprise."

"O-kay," says Ratio, surprised to learn that they'd owed the prophet of death and his curse at all. "But, um, Mrâ€uh, G-Gasquet?"

"Yeah?"

"W... What's an opera?"

Gasquet's smile is a crooked one, the smile of someone who's forgotten how.

* * *

><p>Despite rules stating that children below the age of twelve are not permitted to visit, Ratio is somehow allowed. Once Ratio attains his certificate, he'll wonder about the exception. Perhaps he barely looked old enough to pass. He'll never know.</p>

When Ratio first lay eyes on Miwako, she'd had a swallow's laugh, bright eyes full of life, a dancer's build and a lively flush to her skin.

Ratio will forget what he sees when he enters, beyond a sea of white. White sheets, white skin. He'll forget all the details to his visit except the weight of a camera in his hands and an invitation to drop by again.

That's the last time he sees Miwako alive.

Ratio never manages to visit her again.

* * *

><p>Ratio doesn't remember when, or where, or how, but he remembers Gasquet telling him she'd passed away.</p>

The only reason he remembers is because that's the moment eight year old Ratio, whose best friend is death, realised he'd been abandoned so many times that he'd forgotten how to cry.

* * *

><p>"Thank you for everything."</p>

It's Gasquet's voice, in a vacuum of space and time and fragments of memory. A void of nothingness, no place, no context, stretching in every direction toward infinity.

"Does it matter what they say about you, Ratio?"

Still Gasquet, but not the name 'Ratio'; a name snatched away.

"You gave us extra time.

"Death is inevitable. It's terrifying because nobody knows about it, because it's a trip where nobody's come back."

"Challenges are made to be faced head-on."

"Things shouldn't be hidden because of fear. I wasn't going to turn away when we could confirm if Miwako had any condition. Knowledge is power, right?"

* * *

><p>Disembodied laughter.</p>

"Or I could cut the crap and admit why I really believed you back then."

"Being worried and overly annoying is just the way I show my love for someone."

* * *

><p>"With that eye of yours, have you considered becoming a doctor?"<p>

* * *

><p>A month after the news about Miwako, Ratio meets Birthday. It's with the scraps of Birthday's own memories that Ratio's able to recall their first encounter.<p>

Ratio had approached him, told him he needed a check-up, otherwise he was going to die.

Birthday'd replied with a cackle so ridiculous it shouldn't have existed outside cartoons for children.

Then Birthday punched him.

"Shut up," Birthday says, moments before being given detention despite it being his first day back to school. "I don't need you people telling me what to do."

* * *

><p>It's the start of the best friendship Ratio's ever had.<p>

* * *

><p>When they're twelve years of age, Ratio steals himself, gathers every fibre of courage in his body, then turns to Birthday and says: "You're going to die."<p>

It's not the same as when they'd met; this time, it's not the prophet of death but Ratio, the boy who is Birthday's bestest friend.

Birthday turns to look at him from the hospital bed.

"I know."

The aftermath of the last attack has left him too tired to sustain his usual delusions of grandeur, but the fire in his eyes isn't completely gone. Don't think I'm going to give up. You're stuck with me._

In another story, another time, Ratio may have clutched him possessively and declared that he would make sure it didn't happen, because Birthday is his bestest friend and he never, ever wants his curse to come true. But in this time, Ratio reaches out. Birthday tenses, anticipating a punch. He ends up squawking in surprise when Ratio hugs him instead.

Birthday's warm, smelling of lemon-scented detergent and hospital-grade antiseptic. It's a scent Ratio's slowly growing accustomed to.

"I'll be with you," Ratio says. "If you want anything, I'll give it to you."

"Well, then," mumbles Birthday, "I'd like you to get off before the nurses think you're messing up my IV. I'd also like a soda. And maybe a cure."

Ratio releases him, smuggles in some grape soda from the vending machines and decides to become a doctor.

* * *

><p>Birthday will never tell Ratio that he'd hoped Ratio would give up his quest for a cure within the first year, but Ratio can read it in his eyes.</p>

When they're sixteen and awkwardly settling into high school, Ratio buys Birthday grape soda again. Birthday doesn't say anything about the search for a cure.

What Birthday does tell him is that he prefers vanilla.

* * *

><p>Facultas has no problems with a student that has an incurable illness, so long as they pass the standards set for everyone who enrols: All entrants need to show Minimum potential, and all its students must pass all subjects in order to graduate. Only the smallest of second chances are allowed, due to scheduling concerns: no more than two courses may be repeated at one time.</p>

It's rather telling when the reason Birthday's expelled is because he'd been in a coma when he'd been set to take his final exams.

Of course, Ratio follows him.

* * *

><p>The only reason either of them can enter high school, despite no longer having any records, is because the Minimum Agency is interested in Ratio.</p>

* * *

><p>The first time they remember meeting Chiyuu is when she approaches them in high school. Chiyuu's steps had been shy, but her gaze determined, and it'd been with firm resolution that she'd planted herself in front of their desks at lunchtime.</p>

Chiyuu's anxiety doesn't cripple her ability to communicate until she breaks into the art scene, a combination of repetitive coercion and exotic synesthesia leaving her unable to speak in anything other than colour. But she is still nervous enough in her high school years that, when she says something, it's too soft for Ratio and Birthday to hear.

They lean closer. Chiyuu steels herself with a deep breath, then repeats it: "What happened to your names?"

Ratio and Birthday exchange a glance.

"Our names?" prompts Ratio.

" 'Ratio', 'Birthday'... they aren't the same."

"Of course not," says Birthday. "We aren't the same person. He's Birthday and I'm Ratio. Or not, a-hee~"

"No..." says Chiyuu. "They're not the same names you had from elementary school. No one notices they're different, just that they've forgotten. They think it's the same."

Birthday's grin falters.

"...You know our old names?" he asks, humour gone.

Chiyuu shakes her head. "I also forgot. Then, something did happen."

"It did," says Ratio. Only those who've entered Facultas know that children become blank slates the moment they're included into its system. Better to be molded, more capable of unlimited growth.

"Don't you want them back?"

Ratio and Birthday look at each other again. Of course, goes unspoken, as well as its reply: It'd be nice to know. Birthday sighs and breaks the gaze, turns back to Chiyuu whilst stretching lazily.

"Eh," he grumbles, "it doesn't matter. Like you said, nobody else can tell."

* * *

><p>When Ratio meets Gasquet again, he's twenty-one and so distracted that he'd forgotten to double-check if his blind spot was empty before turning out of the store. He'd walked into Gasquet, stared dumbly at the face at once unfamiliar and someone he knew, rifled unsuccessfully through his directory of names and faces, unable to dredge up the correct memory.</p>

Gasquet recognises him first.

"Wait, you'reâ€"" Pause. His breath hitches, and his eyes flicker in confusion. It's the expression of someone who's reaching for Ratio's old name but finding nothing where there should be something.

"...That boy that helped Miwako."

Miwako. Ratio'd remembered then.

"Ga â€" Mr. Gasquet?" Ratio asks.

"That's me," says Gasquet. "So it is you. But you are...?"

"I go by Ratio now."

"Ah... the Agency."

Ratio starts. "You know about them, Mr. Gasquet?" The Minimum?

"Unfortunately. But that's not important right now," says Gasquet. He takes a step back, his eyebrows go up, and he laughs. "Look at you! You've grown so much. If it weren't for your eyepatch and fashion sense I wouldn't have made the connection."

Ratio doesn't know how to reply, so he settles for a small smile. He compares the Gasquet before him to the one in his memories too. The years have stripped all colour from the top of Gasquet's head, and added wrinkles around lively eyes. Gasquet's words are no longer accompanied with as much boisterous gestures and flair, but Ratio can still sense the energy sleeping beneath the surface of his skin.

"Mr. Gasquetâ€œ" begins Ratio.

"You can still drop the 'Mr.', don't go being a stranger now."

"...Alright. How are you, Gasquet?"

"Me?" says Gasquet. "I'm alright. Joined the police some years ago. Spent the last year mentoring my partner Art. He's getting promoted soon, so I wanted to surprise him with some of his favourite cheesecake." Gasquet gestures toward a yellow sign nearby: _Sweets&Treats Bakery_. "He's also a Facultas graduate, like you."

"I... didn't graduate."

"You didn't? Thenâ€œ" Gasquet glances at the box under Ratio's arm â€œ a toaster, just purchased. "Sorry for jumping to conclusions."

Children enter Facultas as a blank slate. If they leave before graduating, they leave with no documents and no proper identification. Most are picked up by the Minimum Agency to work low-skill, low-paid roles: data collection, tracking unregistered Holders, physical labour. Birthday would have most likely joined the ranks of Facultas's guards if his illness did not make him worthless â€œ or if Ratio hadn't been by his side.

The Minimum Agency wanted Ratio working for them immediately. Ratio's Minimum is so valuable that he'd been allowed to negotiate, insisting for Birthday to be placed into high school. With at least a high school diploma, Birthday wouldn't be forced into working for the Agency or for nobody at all.

(Of course, Birthday'd refused to go to school unless Ratio went with him.)

So Ratio knows Gasquet's thoughts: _He can't have dropped out. He shows signs of a steady income._

Ratio forces himself to smile. "It's fine. Well, I... thank you for the suggestion."

"Suggestion?"

"To become a doctor."

Gasquet opens his mouth. Whatever he wants to say is never said, because his phone rings. Gasquet looks to Ratio apologetically as he searches for it, but his demeanour sharpens when he looks at the screen.

If Ratio still has any doubt that this man is the same as the one he met thirteen years before, it's gone. The instantaneous shift, the taking of charge, is identical to the one which sparked Ratio's curiosity before.

"I have to go," says Gasquet. "Come drop by the police department someday."

Gasquet runs before Ratio gets a chance to reply.

Ratio's left staring up at the yellow sign nearby, the one for the bakery. There's a strange mark, like a crack, in one corner; a curvy little thing with tiny vines.

It won't be until two years later when Ratio would meet Gasquet one more time.

* * *

><p>"Hey, hold up," Birthday will say, as they'll be on their way to deliver photos to a woman called Momoka, then ask: "Aren't you going to tell me about the story behind this Miwako?"</p>

Ratio's recollection would be hazy and fragmented, as always. Instances, not sequences; third and first person all jumbled together in disarray. Few people in Facultas remember anything from before they're detached from their former identity. To be able to consciously link components between his past self and his current, Ratio is lucky.

Ratio will do his best to tell his story, in as much clarity and structure as he can, because Birthday is his real friend and Birthday cares.

Birthday will be silent until Ratio is done, thinking about storms and static and unpleasant electricity.

When they finally arrive at Anemone, Birthday will spin a story about giving away the truth of the photos. Then, he'll sit alone against the sound of rain and think about the knowledge he'd never thought to ask his best friend for.

* * *

><p>File attached: matchbox-memory.F3

[visit profile for link or edit this url to view: i. imgur {dot~com} kDjU3jT. jpg]

* * *

><p>TBC/**

* * *

><p>((I like to think Ratio was a very impressionable and sheltered little dork as a kid. Emphasis on the dork. c': He and Birthday being more violent with each other in this AU is definitely a result of their first meeting and not your imagination.)_)

11. 09

content warning, from this chapter onwards: _lots of things._ i'm not going to tag because i don't even know where to begin, and it's always the strangest things that can set people off, so look after yourselves okay?

* * *

><p>Ratio is avoiding him.</p>

Birthday watches Ratio, this machine hunched over his work desk, surrounded by papers and textbooks and various files from years ago. When Ratio'd returned that rainy day, he'd only gone for all of an hour without his eyepatch before wearing it again. The return of depth perception skewed his bearings and caused him to walk into furniture he'd once had no trouble avoiding, so it's better to keep it on; that was the reason Ratio'd given.

After speaking no more than a handful of sentences to Birthday every day for the past few days, and even leaving money so they'd have no reason to talk, Birthday finds Ratio as believable as product marketing.

Birthday'd spent the money on extravagant meals and ero-magazines, hoping to get a rise out of his robotic roommate. Ratio'd just paused to skim the receipts Birthday left, glanced briefly at one magazine and a note that he needed to "de-stress", and moved on without even turning pink or giving a scowl.

Ratio is working or Ratio is studying.

Birthday has a limited run swimsuit edition open in front of him, but it could have been a financial report for all the attention he gives its material.

Working, or studying â€“ whichever it is, Ratio is definitely avoiding him.

"You're such an idiot," Birthday tells him.

To his surprise, the tin man speaks. "I saw four patients that morning. If I mis-diagnosed..."

"You passed those medical exams, didn't you?"

"I can't make any mistakes."

"But all doctors make mistakes."

"I can't. Not when... not if I have a Perspective Minimum."

Birthday stops pretending to read and closes the magazine. Ratio

still hasn't lifted his head, not once. Birthday rises to his feet, places the magazine where he'd just been sitting, and walks over to Ratio's desk before looking down at the table. What looks like a mess from afar is a fortress of well-defined organisation; Ratio's notes are neat, structured, elegant and beautiful.

(There's a folder beside Ratio's computer containing details about Birthday's illness, a folder that Birthday's trained himself to ignore.)

"They won't kick you out if you make a mistake, though," says Birthday.

"What if the Agency decides to look into my Minimum?"

Then they'll pull all financial support, drop you as a doctor for unspecified reasons, and it will be difficult for you to find work as one again. They're consequences Birthday knows.

What Birthday's also aware of is Ratio's very, very bad inability to hide when he's scared. Birthday's right up next to him, and Ratio's been perfectly still. He's a snapshot, a cinematic freeze-frame. It's the stillness that gives all of Ratio's fear and uncertainty away.

Birthday wonders what it's like to lose the very thing defining him for his entire life. The thought isn't a difficult one. He closes his eyes; he imagines waking up in a body without his illness, in a body with no prongs anchored in his chest, no slimy tentacles sucking breath from crumbling-sponge lungsâ€"

â€"he tries to imagines his dream in the form of a nightmare.

[_Sorry, "Freedom" is currently out of stock._]

[_Attached is a complimentary collection of "Uselessness" and "Humanity"._]

A sickening shame coils in his stomach when Birthday concludes he'll never understand his best friend's situation.

Not that anything in the world can ever stop Birthday from trying.

Birthday must have shifted because Ratio tenses.

"What?" says Ratio suspiciously.

"What?" echoes Birthday, innocently. He reaches behind him without turning around, and feels blindly for what he's searching for. There's the sound of scraping.

"...Birthday."

Birthday takes a seat in the chair he'd pulled up. "Yes, Ratiocchi?"

"I can't concentrate if you're here."

"That's funny," comments Birthday. "You seemed real good at

concentrating when looking at those magazinesâ€" "

Ah. There it was. The first flush in a while, spreading the warmth of a candle in a snowstorm.

Ratio's scowl isn't nearly as effective as he hopes.

"_Birthday!_"

"_Ratio!_" is his reply._ "If you don't like _sukumizu_, I regret to inform you that we can't be friends any more!"

Ratio finally looks at Birthday. Birthday's heart hovers, buoys to the surface, and his lips curve into the smile of sweet success. Ratio's own smile is slow to rise, but he does eventually join Birthday away from the pit of hungry despair. Ratio's annoyed frown and flat stare never had a chance against Birthday's A-Class enthusiasm.

Never quick to waste an opportunity, Birthday borrows Ratio's shoulder as an armrest and leans closer.

"Say, Ratio?" begins Birthday.

"...yes?"

"You know what would make all thisâ€"" Birthday gestures grandly to everything on the table, "â€"go away?"

"I do," replies Ratio. _I stop searching for your cure._ "But I have promises to keep."

There's a small Birthday flattered by Ratio's dedication. Birthday grabs it by the collar and tosses it into some dark corner of his brain.

"And you aren't doing anyone any favours by working yourself so hard, moron." Something glints. "Wait, what is that? Are you having coffee _now?_"

"Don'tâ€" "

It's too late; Birthday'd already dived forward and snatched the mug from Ratio's table. He pinches his face snobbishly before taking a sip, and then his face twists in real disgust when he tastes it.

"Fuck," says Birthday, "this â€" this isn't even coffee, this is _inhuman_. How much of this shit is in your system?"

"Too much," the quiet reply.

Birthday, in the process of disposing the substance into his own stomach, nearly spits the contents of his mouth onto Ratio's lab coat. "_Fuck._ Do we still have that tea?"

"Which?"

"The one the Kansai chick convinced me to buy back in January. The oxidising one or whatever."

"To the right of the fridge."

Birthday teeters slightly when he rises to his feet. A buzzing in the back of his head informs him he's not going to sleep for days. Man, he's _so_ buzzed.

It takes simultaneously a second and a century to get to the kitchen and wait for the water in the kettle to boil. For a few very long minutes, there are no sounds in the apartment beyond Birthday's agitated shuffling, until the water begins to burble and burble and the kettle begins to shimmy in unison with the steam billowing from its lip, in the dance of some foreign pre-tea ritual.

The tea is some fancy schmancy shade of light red at first. Birthday looks between the box of dried flowers and leaves, down to the mug, thinks about how long Ratio's been working, then drops more of the tea in until the peachy colour becomes dark crimson — the same shade as the box it'd been in.

Yeah, that'll do.

When Birthday returns, Ratio is back to work. Birthday takes a seat and places the tea where the mug of coffee once stood. He's given a small glance. Birthday grins back. It's better than being ignored again.

Ratio is improving, and just needs some more Birthday Magic to get better.

"Hey," says Birthday, "want a back massage?"

"No."

"Lighten up, I promise I'll make it worth your€"

"Last time, you pulled out your stun gun and used your Minimum to€"

For an instant, there's only silence. It's too late when Birthday realises he's misjudged. Ratio doesn't seize, because Ratio never _seizes_, but his pen stops and his shoulders tighten. The wind-up toy with no more give left in its coil.

The sudden stiffening is more than enough to tell Birthday he's hit all the mines in Ratio's mental battlefield. He's failed — and in the worst way.

"...You still have yours," says Ratio.

It's not a question, but Birthday still answers. "Yeah." He'd turned on his stun gun earlier, felt his Minimum humming in teeth that craved contact with deadly electricity. "I do."

Ratio is so still that Birthday can't let himself blink, or else he'd miss the subtle rise and fall of the chest that still indicated Ratio's breathing. It passes as soon as Ratio flips the page, and returns to his reading as if nothing'd occurred. The dismissal's accompanied by the sinking realisation that, no matter how far Birthday stretches his arm, he'll never be able to reach Ratio beyond the cliff of decay.

Birthday debates with himself and decides it couldn't get worse if he tried one last time.

"Hey, Ratio?" he says.

There's silence. Ratio doesn't give any indication he'd heard, but Birthday knows he's listening.

"You're worth more than just your Minimum," says Birthday.

Ratio touches a hand to his eyepatch. Cotton meets leather meeting steel. "It would be nice if that was true."

* * *

><p>09: and miles to go

* * *

><p>There is no regret more wretched than waking up from a good night's sleep, finding the letter of a loved one's death, and then dismissing it as a badly executed joke in order to stay on-schedule.<p>

Skill's bed had been empty; Skill simply woke earlier than Art, as he was occasionally prone to doing. Skill hadn't been there at breakfast; he'd forgotten. Missing lunch. He's studying. Not seen all day â€“ they just didn't bump into one another, since they're in different years and different classes. The Academy never sent personal mail to its students; why should they now?

It hadn't been until late afternoon, once Skill failed to show up for their study session, when Art first realised that something was very, very wrong.

Studying a third language at Facultas is to be in a room with dozens of children, surrounded by books and computers and audio DVDs. It is more efficient to allocate their budget to a periodically-present tutor who may answer any questions, and let its students be assessed via language proficiency tests set by external agencies. There are no teachers, only supervisors. No classes, only timeslots. Facultas expects diligence, work ethic, obedience and self-study.

Art'd chosen Mandarin Chinese, because of Japan's proximity to the economic power and their language similarity. Skill'd originally studied Italian, for no reason other than his enjoyment for the language and its sounds. Art had convinced Skill to switch, because the Chinese dialects make up the language studied by the majority. It gave him access to better resources: more people to converse with, and a tutor that arrives fortnightly compared to Italian's twice-quarterly internet call.

In search of his remaining family, Art had gone to the last student studying Italian.

"Skill?" Honey'd repeated, raising her eyebrows over her notebook. Art won't ever forget how deceptively lazy her expression had been, gaze half-lidded and lips curved around a lollipop stick. "No. Non l'ho visto. Not since he apologised for transferring."

Art still wonders how he hadn't left scars in his palm after how hard he'd clenched his fists. But he didn't give up hope. Just as everyone knows Art has no Minimum, everyone knows Honey and her all-powerful Analysis Minimum.

If anyone could find anything, it would be Honey.

(Rumour claims she's the princess of Facultas Academy, daughter of one of its directors, though nobody'd broken through the icy exterior long enough to find out if it was true. Skill had tried, countless times, to Art's exasperationâ€"repeatedly insisting, _"She just hasn't found the right friend yet, brother."_)

"He's missing," said Art. "Could I... ask you to search for him?"

Honey's book slapped closed.

"...Fine," she replied. "If it's him. But you owe me, got that?"

"That's no problem."

"Good." She stood up, packing her things with precise efficiency.
"Come with me."

Art did. Any assumptions he may have had about their destination were voided as soon as Honey took a side door marked "Staff Only" when they neared the East Wing. Despite knowing Facultas and its layout well, given his years of study, the corridors they traversed were so unfamiliar and snake-winding that Art had to focus all his attention on matching Honey's pace in case she turned a corner and disappeared from view.

"Where are we...?"

"Shh. You're paying me back for the favour."

"Pardon?"

"They confiscated my prototype because I didn't agree, so you're going to be the distraction while I get it back."

"But Skillâ€""

They were greeted by a heavy stainless steel door, guarded by an electronic lock. "I'll need my Mighty to find him, doofus."

Honey reached beneath her sweater and begun rummaging; it took a moment for Art to realise she was reaching for the breast pocket of her shirt, but he'd still glanced away â€" enough to see the security camera in one corner of the ceiling, staring directly at them.

A shifting of fabric alerted him to Honey extracting a keycard, which she then clicked into the door lock's reader. The LED light flashed red. Honey muttered to herself irritably, yanked the plastic out with more force than necessary, then inserted the small chip once more.

It didn't work.

On the third try, she flipped open the plastic case covering the keypad, entered a string of six keys, and received the low-pitched beep of _Access Denied_.

The lack of security rushing to apprehend them should have been the first indication they wouldn't be able to enter.

"But they haven't changed the passcode for years...!" Honey turned to Art, gaze calculating. "Can your Minimum get us through?"

Art blinked. "I... don't have a Minimum."

"_For real?_ You're what, eighteen?"

"Sixteen." Turning seventeen.

"When was the last time you were scanned?"

"Yesterday."

(_With Skill, who'd also reported negative. They'd made good luck cakes again. Art had saved his portion for their study session, for when Skill would inevitably grow hungry._)

"And they haven't read your activation-manifestation sequence yet?"

"No. It's still undevelopedâ€" "

"â€" _Art!_"

Art jerks toward the voice, and discovers Gasquet in the doorway to his office; he's no longer a student but a Superintendent in the present, and he has duties to perform. A drawer sits open by his side, containing a photo of Skill and a photocopy of Facultas's letter. The original is stored in a rented safe at the other end of Yokohama. Art has read it so many times that its sides are worn yellow and he can recite it off by heart.

[_Skill has been discharged from Facultas.]

[_His transport bus had been hijacked by terrorists. He died at the scene._]

Art takes a deep breath, pushes back the memory, then rises from behind his desk. The drawer is closed and locked in the same movement. There's no need to look back down.

"Sorry," says Art, tucking the key into his pocket. "Has something happened?"

"There's been a terrorist threat at Ni-TV's building in Minato Mirai."

Only one word makes its way into Art's brain.

Art freezes.

"A terrorist?" he asks.

Gasquet nods just as Art begins moving at triple speed. "The station's occupants have been taken hostage. There's no word on numbers yet. Rune hasn't had an opportunity to confirm with his Minimum."

"Rune is in charge on the ground?"

"No, Iwahashi is."

"Could you get me a line to him, Mr. Gasquet?"

It looks like Gasquet inches away, but Art chalks it up to the parallax when he'd leant over to grab his night vision goggles.
(Just in case.)

"Why?" asks Gasquet.

"I'd like to take lead."

"But..." There's no illusion here; Art can't deny that, for some reason, Gasquet is hesitating. "You should leave it to them, Art."

Art freezes in his tracks like he's walked straight into a wall. He may as well have "one more step and he would have slammed into Gasquet's frame. Contrary to Art's hurry, Gasquet hasn't moved since they'd first spoken.

"I have to take this, Mr. Gasquet," Art tells him. For Skill.
"It's... that time of year."

Gasquet's gaze drifts to the drawer that holds Art's memories. Art finally manages to place Gasquet's behaviour: Worry.

"...Yep," says Gasquet. It's hard to tell what he's agreeing to. "But you've been working very hard on the serial killer case, haven't you?"

"That's irrelevant"

"You need to take a break."

"I'm going on leave at the end of next week."

"Iwahashi hasn't indicated that he needs our help." Gasquet sighs.
Please, Art. I'm concerned about you."

Gasquet looks aside, and Art copies him. He finds himself staring at the window, walling off wispy clouds atop a backdrop of blue. It's nearly a week since it'd finally stopped raining, and Art's first thought is of bandages and brown hair. His second thought is that of lying on the ground next to Skill after training, clothes drenched with sweat and hair mixed with dirt.

Skill's white hair blowing over his face. Skill's bubbly laughter when he catches sight of a lone bird gliding from one edge of their vision to the other.

Skill tugging at Art's sleeve, _"did you see it? Did you _see_it?"_

[_A weight which had fallen asleep on his chest, stirring â€“]

[_â€“ and Skill's glare when he discovered only one of them had been resting._]

Art's too close. Too unable to think past Skill, unable to think rationally. It's a painful reminder.

Art closes his eyes to force the vision away, and bows his head before he can change his mind.

"...Alright, Mr. Gasquet," he says. "I'll â€“ I'll trust they can do the job, but I would still like to be involved during questioning."

Gasquet smiles. "Good, Art. Why don't you sleep for a while?"

"I'd be too frustrated to fall asleep."

"You might actually make some progress. Give it a try."

"What about you?" asks Art.

"Don't you start worrying about me," is the reply. "I'm going to start looking into that leak in the police force that you keep talking to yourself about."

The leak. Of course Gasquet would notice, even though Art's tried to keep his suspicions to himself. There's very little room to move when he only has suspicions and circumstance to work from.

Art forces himself to smile back. It's easier than he expects, but he isn't surprised, considering he's talking to the man that's kept him sane.

"Thank you, Mr. Gasquet."

* * *

><p>Art spends the time crouched in front of a television set, rather than napping, in the meeting room assigned to the task force keeping an eye on the case. There are reports coming in every five minutes with updates on the situation from those on the ground, but with every second stretched across stress and anxiety, five minutes last more than a day.</p>

Rune's Telescopic Minimum leaves them with numbers. One terrorist, fifty-two hostages. Cross-referencing with blueprints reveal they're holed up into the boardroom, whose curtains have been closed to prevent police sniping. The youngest hostage is a young intern still new enough to wear his ID, identified at nineteen.

The intern's photo depicts grey eyes ringed by dark smudges, and a resting face adorned with a prominent frown.

Art still sees Skill, even though he and the intern look nothing alike.

Scanning the twenty-six photographs arranged in a grid atop one of the tables, all those among the hostages which Rune had managed to identify, all Art continues seeing is twenty-six copies of Skill and Skill's smile.

When Art had finally showed Honey the letter, she'd taken it with an expression hauntingly grim.

"That's definitely real," Honey'd said. "You see here? This heading in the corner? I'd prepared it. Some of them can't use a computer."

"Then, Skill..."

"It says, _non? He's dead. Terrorists killed him."

That time, clenching his fists proved ineffective at suppressing any outbursts. Confirmation ignited suffering, transforming despair into regret and regret into scorching self-loathing. Art had punched the wall, again and again, wearing thin the skin around his knuckles while a stream of salt ran over his cheeksâ€"out of his nose, into his mouth, clung desperately to his chin.

He'd forgotten that Honey'd still been there.

"You can cry here, or you can catch them."

What had Skill felt in his final moments? wonders Art, even though he ought to be focused on the case at hand. _Fear? Pain? Knowledge that he's destined to die?_

More than five and a half hours later, according to his watch, the siege comes to an end. Art doesn't get to see its conclusion. He hadn't been present the moment Iwahashi and his men stormed the premises; all he knows are the shouts he'd heard all the way from the bathroom, the sight of giant flames threatening to escape the live feed once he returned, and the information from a quick debriefing.

Ten dead, twelve injured. Twenty-one unaccounted for. Nine physically unharmed, out of fifty-two. Somehow the criminal'd been restrained, alive and unharmed. The fire department is doing their best to keep the fire under control.

The criminal had a Blaze Minimum. The fire department is only human.

Gasquet goes ahead to arrange the terrorist's transfer. Art lingers. Whether this terrorist is the same man responsible for the busjacking does not matter. Not when there's an officer hovering at the table of photos, flipping each one over to check names and mark their status as dead or alive; Skill has died, ten times.

Art breathes in. This is just another case. Murder, kidnapping, arson. Art lets the oxygen settle in his lungs, holds his breath until he feels blood pulsing behind his brain. It's just another case he's covered before.

When he breathes out, he's Superintendent Art, the youngest

Superintendent in Kanagawa's Prefectural Police Force, and head of the First Division in Criminal Investigation's Bureau.

Once Art leaves the room, there's no choice. He has to be ready.

* * *

><p>Of all the people Art expects, it's not an attractive man in his thirties — confident, well-built, and tall even when chained to a chair. He'd been stripped, forced to change clothes into the detention centre's uniform. Prominent cheekbones are accentuated by a high ponytail made of brown hair, once threaded with beads, and handsome blue eyes watch with disinterest as Gasquet leads Art into the room.</p>

The man's old clothes and belongings sit on a table outside, to be tagged as evidence. Among them is a wooden comb, for the activation of the Blaze Minimum.

"Sakiyama Seiji," says the man, cutting off Art when he begins introducing his charges. "Thirty-six. Born February 16th, blood type O. I plead guilty for everything. I don't want to hire my own lawyer. Can we get this over with?"

Art pauses.

"Well, yes," he says, "that's almost everything. You appear to be well-informed about procedure."

"Of course I am," is Sakiyama's reply. "Research is a vital component to everyday life. Agree?"

Art inclines his head without giving an answer. He stops in front of the small table in the centre of the room, then rests a hand on the chair opposite Sakiyama's. Gasquet takes a position to Art's left, and slightly behind.

"Regardless, there are still some questions left to ask," says Art.

"Ask away."

"The building, the Ni-TV television station — what do you think about Ni-TV?"

It happens in an instant: one moment, Sakiyama is calm and composed; the next, he's lunged himself forward, bloodlust seeping red into the corners of his eyes, accompanied by a jingle of metallic chains.

"Ni-TV?" is the growl, "_Ni-TV?_ Japan's 'premier network for quality entertainment'? I don't _think_ so. Maybe they should _re-brand_ _themselves_ after the _fucking_ mess they made with _Ride Glass zII!_"

Art tenses. "_Ride Glass_...?"

"Oh," and in another instant, the man-eating troll returns to human. Sakiyama leans back before lounging again. "I forget we live in the age of the unenlightened. _Ride Glass zII_ is the long-awaited sequel

to a highly popular anime, consistently selling blu-ray disk numbers ofâ€" "

"You're an _otaku?_" says Gasquet.

"Yes."

Art doesn't allow himself to relax, even if Sakiyama has. He supposes he shouldn't be surprised that the media's stereotyped image of an otaku is incredibly inaccurate. There's no needle-thin limbs, no overweight, unclean slob. He looks and behaves like any person on the street, with no grotesque features about him.

But Art's been in law enforcement long enough to understand that appearances are often deceiving.

"What is it like being an otaku?" is Art's next question.

"Are you trying to lead me?"

"Please answer the question."

Sakiyama snorts. He tilts his head back and stares up at Art, saying: _very well. I'll humour you._

"There goes a saying," begins Sakiyama, "that an otaku does not commit a crime, nor suicide, because they have to watch another episode of anime next week. Ergo, what would drive an otaku to such lengths would be dire indeed! ...Can you not see?"

"See...?"

"Being an otaku is being tossed around by the network that their anime airs on! What if that otaku lost hope? What if that otaku could no longer see a future in this age where every anime must be dark and gritty or be no show at all! _What if Ni-TV shafted my dearest Sisi and exploited her purity on-screen?_"

[_..._]

Art blinks.

"And that drove you to flames," says Gasquet.

Art can't remember the last time Gasquet'd sounded so serious in his life.

"Yes," Sakiyama replies, in the same tone. "For the good of the world, I'll take vengeance on those who dare sully my Sisi's good name."

"I understand," says Gasquet; "Your frustration â€" I understand it well."

Art decides there's no point mentioning that television stations often purchased their content rather than producing their own.

Instead, Art thinks: This is the type of logic which Skill had lost his life to?

(Art wonders what Gasquet'd planned to achieve.)

"That is your motive?" says Art.

Sakiyama picks up on the apprehension and frowns. "You have a problem with that?"

"...No. The courts will decide whether or not it's necessary to investigate further from here. I do have a few more questions, howeverâ€" "

"What, so I can't leave?"

"Once you answer them," says Art, "you will be escorted back to your cell."

There's another jangle of metal. Sakiyama tosses his fringe back with a flick of his head. Art takes it as an invitation to continue.

"Where were you on the 7th of January, four years ago?"

"Are you fucking serious?" says Sakiyama.

At the same time, Art's peripheral awareness tells him Gasquet is staring.

"Four years ago," repeats Art. "Where were you in early January, on the 7th?"

"Look, how should I know? That's like asking me what I had for breakfast yesterday. What's so important about that date, anyway?" Sakiyama pauses; an idea occurs. "Unless... it's one of those unsolved cases."

Art remains perfectly still. "Sakiyama Seiâ€" "

"It is, isn't it?"

"Please answer the question."

"No, thank you," says Sakiyama. "How about you answer mine instead? Of course you can't, because you're weak." Sakiyama reaches up to his hair, and then his eyes shine with mirth when Art shifts in preparation to restrain him. "Even though I have no way to activate it without my comb, you're scared of me, and need these stupid chains to do what you can't. You're just weak and scared of my Minimum!"

Art signals to Gasquet that the session is over. Gasquet nods, inclines a head to the door; Art nods back and then walks over to the exit.

"Useless!" Sakiyama continues in the background; "Everyone looks down on you, you can't change yourself, and you can't change the world. That's what it's like before getting a Minimum. Forced to obey, powerless to take actionâ€"oi, get back here, fucker_, and face me like a man!"

Art closes the door behind him.

The second room is more breathable than the last; whilst it's not larger, it would never be described in the same way. Where one room is dim, lit only by a lonely lamp, the other is illuminated from blinding-white walls to the hollows in the corners. One sparse, isolated â€" the other, filled with tables and chairs and the combination of breathing and idle chatter from officers waiting on standby.

The officers rise to their feet as soon as they see Art. Art can only manage a half-smile but it's still returned with full attention. Among the officers is Rune, the only other Facultas graduate within the First Division. Inspector Rune has an average face and average height, average patterns of speech, and performs average operations. His genericness, calculatedly unmemorable, gives him full prominence in Art's memory.

Dismissal is the first step to being blindsided. Two years with the man has been more than enough to teach Art that there's a sleeping intelligence somewhere within.

Taking advantage of the chain of command, Art asks Rune to have Sakiyama taken to his cells, and then Rune turns to his men and orders them. A flurry of movement follows.

"Superintendent," says Rune, in the brief instant where the two of them are alone. Rune indicates the table of evidence, all sorted, then subtly points out an object that looks like a metallic lighter. It hadn't been with the evidence earlier. "That arrived from the Minimum Agency."

Art suppresses any comments he may have made under different conditions. "I see. Do we know what it is?"

"Just a miniature flamethrower."

A simple cover-up, to protect the secret of the Minimum.

Art thanks him before taking his leave, and returns to his office so he may write his report. It's halfway complete when Gasquet appears. Gasquet's clothes stink of acrid cigarette smoke, offering an explanation for his absence without having to say a word.

Gasquet sees the document open on Art's computer, and Art knows that he doesn't have to explain anything either.

"Want me to check over it once you're done?" offers Gasquet.

Art shakes his head. Fortunately, Gasquet hadn't smoked enough for his breath to smell as strongly. "I'm fine. But are you really so low on work that you're bored?"

"Ha!" Gasquet laughs. "True. The reports never end, do they?"

"No, they never do."

Art doesn't reply, finishes typing the thought suspended in his mind. The thought that takes its place has him hesitate.

"Say, Mr. Gasquet?" begins Art.

Gasquet, in the middle of leaving, stops as he's about to cross the threshold. "What's up?"

"What do you think about Sakiyama's words at the end?"

"Sakiyama's words... at the end? When he said that non-Holders are useless and weak?" Gasquet tilts his head away from Art. "Hmmâ€"maybe he has a point? With a Minimum, people can do so much more!"

Uncertainty begins to gather in rolling waves; Art clamps down, silences the whispers with commands of _ignore, ignore, ignore.
_..."I see."

Gasquet doesn't notice Art's turmoil. If he does, he doesn't show it.

"But I don't think really it matters," says Gasquet.

"Then what does?"

Gasquet looks back. "Making a perfect world for those you love."

Briefly, Art's fingers tighten around his mouse.

"You're in a relationship, Mr. Gasquet?" asks Art.

"Who knows?" is the reply, though the wide smile and protruding cheekbones give his real answer away. "Thinking I'm too old over here?"

"No, no," and Art shakes his head, "I just thought... you told me you wanted to dedicate yourself because of Miwako."

Gasquet waves a hand dismissively. "Yes, well, of course. But, anyway, don't tell me you're thinking about getting yourself a Minimum."

Getting a Minimum. The phrase reminds Art of somethingâ€"

Sakiyama Seiji's words.

Everyone looks down on you, you can't change yourself, and you can't change the world. That's what it's like before getting a Minimum.

Art stiffens.

"Sakiyama used that verb," says Art.

"Huh?"

" 'Getting' a Minimum. He... he wasn't born with a Minimum, but _got_ himself a Minimum."

Art glances at the unfinished report on his screen, seeing the characters but not comprehending. As the glance becomes a stare, the

characters begin to vibrate, and then white space breaks the words apart into their smallest building blocks until there's nothing left but a mess on the page. Art can't let himself dwell upon it, not when it's one distraction in a sea of stimuli and Art's diving in search for a single point; not when he remembers picking up the needle and forgetting where he'd put it down.

Think. How is it relevant? _What if_â€"

Sakiyama Seiji, his mind offers.

All Art sees is the brown hair, the blue eyes, andâ€"

Art stands up, rushes past Gasquet, and all but _runs_ down the corridors as he leaves the room.

[_Nice. Art's apartment. Chinen Ayami._]

[_Her Minimum exactly matches Green's. Isn't it funny?_]

Sakiyama Seiji has a Blaze Minimum. One of Art's older cases also featured a victim with a Blaze Minimum â€" murdered by the Minimum Holder Serial Killer at least a year ago.

In the archives, a rapidly beating heart leaving him short of breath, Art makes his way to the correct folder with familiar ease. He flips through the files, ignoring the victims' names, identification photos â€" ignoring everything except the name of their Minimum.

Nothing.

When he reaches the last page, Art clenches his teeth so swiftly he nearly bites his tongue, flips back to the front, and tries again.

A year is a long time for a name to be buried beneath countless other crime scenes, because the only memories Art refuses to overwrite are those of Skill. And now, Art can't recall anything but the absolute certainty that they'd handled a Blaze Minimum case before.

Art passes the six-month mark when Gasquet catches up to him.

"Oi, oi," says Gasquet, breathing heavily as he leans against one wall. "Don't run off so fast, y'know? At least tell me where you're going."

Art isn't quite listening. "Do you remember the victim which had the Blaze Minimum, Mr. Gasquet?"

"Hah?"

"One of the Minimum Holder Serial Killer's earlier victims."

A flash of something passes through Gasquet's eyes. Art doesn't get a chance to register what it looks like before it disappears. He's so caught up in thrill and adrenaline, it's passed off as realisation without a moment's pause.

"There wasn't one," says Gasquet.

Art snaps his head around. The whiplash is a petty stabbing beneath his brain. "_What?_"

"Why are you so interested?"

"I may have found a motive," answers Art, automatically. "More importantly, are you certain?"

"I am," is the reply. "There has never been another Blaze Minimum."

Art would have dropped the files in his hands if Gasquet hadn't moved forward to take them. He thinks of blue eyes again, but this time they don't belong to Nice but to Sakiyama Seiji.

That's what it's like before getting a Minimum.

"But he â€œ Sakiyama was speaking from experience," says Art.

"I think you're overthinking things."

"Still, if there are a series of duplicated Minimums that just happen to belong to victims of the serial killer..." Art didn't want to let it go. Not when he'd been so, so _sure_ that it's some kind of clue. "I'm going to check the directory."

He's stopped by the weight of a hand on his shoulder.

"You're blinding yourself, Art," says Gasquet, brows tilted in concern.

"Iâ€œ"

"Please think about it from my perspective. There's no victim. Sakiyama was obviously trying to rile you upâ€œhe could have meant anything. And giving a Minimum to someone? That's impossible," Gasquet says, chuckling in obvious preparation of a joke, "because only a god could. You know?"

Art knows. He's spent so many years waiting for his Minimum potential to manifest â€œ receiving, at the end, nothing at all.

"...You're right," Art concedes. No matter how well his hunch felt, it's just that: a hunch alone. "I... it looks like I do need a break, after all."

Gasquet claps Art on the shoulder twice, before starting to return the files back to the shelves. "You push yourself too hard."

No more words are exchanged in the room; Art responds to the remark with a guilty smile.

A report slips out when Art makes to pick up a folder. Art's about to replace it when he notices it's unfamiliar to him, and he's never read it; a look at the signature reveals Gasquet'd done the filing.

Art is aware of the report's existence, after skimming its conclusion. Gasquet'd informed him. It's about James Shunsuke's case in particular, about the crime scene and the evidence and witness

reportsâ€"

Art pauses when he sees Hajime's name, and reads the section again.

There's no mistake. James Shunsuke'd had a loan, and Hajime had been scheduled to visit him. The link is the most coincidental of coincidences: confrontation with Chinen Ayami aside, Art had only bumped into Hajime because his neighbour'd inherited a loan from Miraki Lending. There aren't enough grounds for any suspicions.

But what was it that Nice had made him promise? Not to investigate where Hajime works until the serial killer case is solved?

Art commits Miraki Lending to memory, and makes a note to search up its address so that he may visit later.

* * *

><p>Whenever Birthday's frustrated, or conflicted, or just needing time to think without annoying thoughts churning their way through his head like he's gone and discovered perpetual motion, Birthday goes for a walk.

He cycles around the block twice. He decides he's hungry, and heads for the nearest convenience store. He reaches the store, takes one look at the sliding glass doors, and sees the girl on-shift who he flirts with whenever he drops by. She looks like one of the models in his magazines, smiling despite confined to glossy laser-printed dots atop thin paper. He looks away.

Birthday changes his mind, shoves his hands into his pockets, and walks on.

Count the steps. One, two, three. Walk on the cracks. Don't walk on the cracks. Cross the road. Another. Don't cross here or you'll loop, take the next exit. Dodge the kids.

Ratio'd been such a handful, even when they were children.

Keep walking.

Three hours have to have passed before Birthday finally looks at his surroundings again. He hadn't checked the time before he'd left, so he doesn't know how long for sure. Two driveways and a control booth are in front of him â€“ and to his left, a towering twenty storey high-rise building blocks out half the sky. The police department's headquarters.

Birthday thinks about it, then decides to enter.

"Gasquet...? Inspector Gasquet?" asks the receptionist behind the counter, after Birthday's asked.

"Yep," says Birthday, thinking: Sounds right. "Gasquet. I don't have his number or anything but he knows me."

The gaze Birthday receives isn't entirely devoid of suspicion. Birthday gives his best smile.

There's a shuffling of papers, then a sheet is placed on the counter.

"If you would like to contact any of our officers, you'll need to use this form," says the receptionist. "Your message will be processed."

"But it'll get to him as soon as possible?"

"...Yes. If there's nothing wrong with it, it will."

Birthday snatches the sheet. It's rude, but what's at stake happens to be Ratio's well-being, so he doesn't care.

Seven minutes later, the form is returned with a simple message:

Please talk to Ratio. He's lost his power._

* * *

><p>"...Birthday."<p>

Birthday lifts his head off his pillow. If there's anything Birthday values more than sleep, it's Ratio. And Ratio's there, leaning against the doorframe to the bedroom, eyes bright and wide, and mouth half-parted for heavy breaths entering and exiting his system. There's a healthy pink tinge to his cheeks like he's just finished a marathon. Birthday can't remember a time when Ratio's looked more _alive_.

Birthday all but kicks off his sheets, where they soar in a flourishing arc before landing on the floor. No effort is made to retrieve them, not when happiness is bubbling in his lungs, after the potion factory finally begins to output bliss as opposed to poison.

He spots the phone in Ratio's hand. Any lingering grogginess disappears.

Thanks, Mr. Cool, thinks Birthday, beaming._ I knew you could bring Ratio back to his senses again._

Goodbye afternoon nap and _hello_ Ratio.

"_Bitter melon stir-fry!_"

Ratio blinks. "What?"

"For dinner," says Birthday. He sits up on the mattress and crosses his legs beneath him. "That's why you're here, right? To ask what I wanted for dinner?"

Not for an instant does Birthday think Ratio believes his act, but he still starts rocking back and forth when Ratio straightens like his old self again.

"Okay, we'll have bitter melon stir-fry," agrees Ratio.

"Yes!"

"But you can't spend our money on any more magazines until next year."

Birthday sighs dramatically and places a hand to his heart.
"Ratiocchi, you're such a strict money-manager."

"And you're such a frivolous spender."

After Ratio reaches into a pocket and tosses a pile of very familiar receipts onto the bed, Birthday holds his breath in case his misaimed Birthday Magic comes back to bite him in the ass again. Ratio's eye softens, and Birthday feels like he's been caught peeking; of course, Ratio notices Birthday's hesitation.

Otherwise, he wouldn't be Ratio.

Birthday glances at the receipts. He cringes when he realises just how many thousands of yen he'd thrown away.

Oh. "I'mâ€"

"You were worried about me."

Said like that, Birthday's guilt whips off its moustache and takes the name indignancy. "Of course I was."

"I'm sorry."

"That's not good enough."

"I..."

Birthday snaps his fingers. "Get over here, moron."

Ratio approaches the bed like he's being dragged by chains. He doesn't look at Birthday. All his muscles are tensed beneath the folds of his lab coat, to reduce the impact of any injury.

It's ineffective when Birthday prods him in the chest, because Ratio's shoulders slump the instant Birthday touches him.

The only thing Birthday ever intended on injuring was Ratio's self-control.

"There's only one promise you have to keep," says Birthday.

"To stay?"

Birthday moves the hand up to flick Ratio's chin. "No, to get bitter melon stir-fry."

"I'll make sure I do that after I finish studying."

There's a pause.

"Wait..." says Birthday, slowly. "Mr. Cool didn't tell you to stop working so hard?"

"Gasquet? No, he said I needed to go back to work and that you were

worried, so I should spend more time with you," Ratio replies.

An icy shock pulses across Birthday's heart.

"You're working, studying, and being around me?" asks Birthday.

"I am."

Dread begins to crystallise Birthday's lungs. "No way." I thought Mr. Cool was a guy that'd get you to stop. "No way," he repeats. Everything's fucked up for real. "Howâ€" How stupid, Birthday! "â€"How are you going to find the time for that? What, are you going to give up your sleep instead?"

Ratio doesn't even laugh, and that's when Birthday knows it's true.

Fuck. Lock me up and let me die.

The slimy tentacles in Birthday's chest drip drip drip, and Birthday's stomach is quivering, and Birthday's organs must all be splattering against the ground like bugs against Ratio's shiny, shiny windshield. Birthday wants to throw up, but he's no longer sure where his intestines have gone. Birthday doesn't want to look down.

(Birthday's going to have an attack again, later. Birthday doesn't want one. If Ratio doesn't sleep, Ratio will find out that Birthday's been timing any attacks to very early morning. Ratio'd found out, once. Ratio'd fallen eerily silent and inhumanly still, his visible eye flashed glow-in-the-dark cerulean, and he'd thrown himself into action like a man possessedâ€"and Birthday'd spent days trying to get him to eat again.)

"You can't go without sleep," says Birthday.

"That's not true," says Ratio. "Gasquet told me about polyphasic sleep cycles. By correctly timing according to the body's natural rhythms, I can condense my normal eight-hour sleep cycle for more efficiency, and be more alert when I am awake. He recommended a two hour sleep pattern of six twenty-minute naps called the Uberman, but I did my own research and think the most optimal for my schedule is the Dymaxionâ€"

'Uberman', 'Dymaxion', greater alertness? If they weren't talking about sleep, Birthday would have assumed that Ratio's friend Gasquet is a drug dealer.

"So you're only going to sleep for two hours?" says Birthday, horrified, because he's of the subspecies that sleeps for at least eleven hours a day. He isn't surprised when he finds his voice quavering.

"Four thirty-minute naps every six hours," corrects Ratio, like it makes a difference. Ratio smiles, like he hasn't become a workaholic with all stress and no downtime. "Get up. By the time you get dressed, it'll be time for dinner."

Birthday does. There's no witty response. He swallows, but it's dry. He's lost his appetite and his innards are probably lost too, because

only that would be able to explain the hollowness clawing around inside him.

He'd misjudged Gasquet's character.

Birthday suspects his list of misjudgements is only going to continue growing.

* * *

><p>When Moral leaves the police's headquarters that day, Moral is humming. Gasquet nods to the officers he passes. Outside, crisp air greets them, accompanied by a soft breeze playing with long, intangible hair.</p>

I love you too, Nice, Moral thinks, and doesn't bother suppressing his grin. There are a few words in Chinese which he knows, and wind is one of them.

Feng.

Moral's phone vibrates. Gasquet looks around to see if anybody is present; seeing no one, Moral reaches into his real pocket. Anybody looking would have seen Gasquet punch his hand through his chest. It'd raise a few eyebrows that would be too bothersome to force back down.

"Momoka," says Moral, "what excellent timing. I was just about to call you."

"I have been trying to contact you for the past hour," replies Momoka.

She sounds a little... annoyed. Yes, that's the word. Moral imagines her tapping an index finger against a hard surface, as she's wont to do. _Tap-tap-tap-tap_â€"

Moral reminds himself to concentrate. "I apologise. I was calling one of Gasquet's friends, so I must not have noticed."

"Surely you could have ignored them," says Momoka, ever the voice of reason.

"But Ratio managed to tell me that Nice _is_ with Success Number 0-1!"

There's a short silence.

"...Ratio, you say?" says Momoka.

"Yes," confirms Moral. "I should have expected Nice was hiding it, he has always been proud of its Minimum... oh, do you know this Ratio?"

"Simply in passing. What did you talk about?"

Moral reaches the bicycle racks, and begins searching for Gasquet's. "Whatever he wanted to hear."

"I see," says Momoka. "Well, the files can't be prepared without any

photos, so if you want them by next week, you'll have to be here immediately."

"That's a bother." Moral had been looking forward to a stroll with the black cosmos before evening.

"Will you be coming?"

"If I must. Have you sent the car over?"

"It's already arrived."

"Thank you, Momoka," says Moral. "You are the most beautiful!"

Momoka makes a sound that could be a dainty huff through her nose, then hangs up. Moral doesn't bother lying to her about his affections, and she knows how his words are mostly meaningless when he's not talking about the love of his life. Beauty is irrelevant when Nice is the most talented. Especially not when Nice is the most wisest, the most smartest, the most amazing being to grace the world with his existenceâ€"

Gasquet's bicycle is a little difficult to find, but Moral succeeds eventually. It's not his fault that all bicycles look the same, with their crooked angles and nasty, unnatural designs.

Unfortunately, Gasquet leaves every day as he always arrives, via one of those wretched instruments of ancient torture.

Learning how to ride a bicycle once, twenty years ago or not, is still more times than Moral ever wants to learn it in his life.

The torture device is unlocked and wheeled out. Moral swings a leg over the frame, and wonders what terrible act of violence he'd committed in his past life. The seat digs upwards in an effort to prevent him procreating ever again.

Thank goodness Momoka's car is waiting for him two blocks over.

"I hate bicycles," mutters Moral as he rides away.

* * *

><p>TBC/**

12. 10

Reminder: Various content warnings, look after yourselves, and feel free to ask if you want confirmation on something specific~

* * *

><p>The apartment is as it always is: small, absent, and lonely.<p>

January the first makes no difference to it.

Hajime tries not to make a sound when she enters and closes the door behind her, because â€" if the time on her phone is correct â€" Nice

is in the midst of another one of his naps, and disturbing him would mean having to deal with an upset schedule and inordinate amounts of fatigue. Fatigue always meant Nice would burn anything he tried to cook one hundred percent of the time, and then Hajime would have to try and deal with dinner for both of them.

Hajime drifts silently past the futon, glances briefly at the time left on Nice's countdown — 15:21, so he'd just fallen asleep — and leaves him alone.

She tip-toes to the bathroom, grabs the bundle of clothes waiting for her, and throws her old garments in one corner for a thorough disinfecting later. She's already washed her hands after the job. There's no way to walk around the city with hands covered in someone else's blood.

She has a shower.

She washes her hands again.

Hajime's sure that Nice knows whenever she's hiding demons beneath her jacket, but it's one of the necessities they never share.

Nice's timer has counted all the way down to 5:55 when Hajime steps out, bandage already over her right eye. Hajime hovers. There's no furrow, no tensing of muscles that say he's having another nightmare.

Hajime likes it when he's sleeping peacefully.

A lock of hair has fallen into his mouth. Hajime tucks her legs beneath her before reaching out, brushing it away. She resists the urge to remove the bandage and check up on him with her Minimum.

"You have the directory," Nice mumbles, lips curved in a satisfied smile.

The timer says 2:18 when Hajime rises to her feet and leaves for work again.

—

"Just a little theoretical experiment," says Nice. "And then I'd like to make you an offer."

On any other day, Art would have said that he had a case to solve, he had no time for theoretical experiments, but he's in Nice's unexpectedly companionable company, and the remains of CafÃ© Nowhere's coffee lie warmly in Art's stomach, so Art raises his brows.

"A theoretical experiment?" echoes Art.

"Yeah." Nice starts absently swinging his umbrella. "Say — you were looking for a Minimum. How would you go about finding it?"

Art gives him a sideways glance. The question is all sorts of leading.

"I would check the directory," he says, carefully.

"No, noâ€|" and Nice shakes his head, "I mean, sure, that is an option, but what if it was just you as a detective? How would you go looking for it then?"

"You'll need to be more specific."

"Okay, then," says Nice's voice. "What if it was the Healing Minimum?"

Art snaps his head behind him. He stares at Nice, who'd stopped walking. Nice is busy fishing his umbrella from the bush it had become entangled in.

Nice notices he's being watched, and smiles back at Art innocuously.

"Guess I shouldn't do that," says Nice, once he catches up.

Art is still thinking. "The Healing Minimum? The one which is said to have the ability to remove any illness?"

"That's the one."

Before either of them could say another word, Art's phone rings. It's Gasquet. Art tries to cast the conversation with Nice aside and answers the call.

"Hello?" he says.

Static.

Art frowns. "Mr. Gasquet?"

No reply.

Art removes the phone from his ear and stares down at the screen.

Nice takes the moment to peer over. He notices the lack of sound emanating from the speaker and offers, "Old man's probably pocket dialling."

It makes sense, but Art still can't erase the unsettling clouds condensing in his chest; perhaps it's the weather that's leading to his apprehension, because of how they'd just sat through a storm.

Art hangs up and puts the phone away.

"Healing Minimum?" reminds Nice.

Ah. They were in a conversation.

"Why are you asking?" says Art.

"Why not?"

Because you just told me that you were Feng, the one person in

Yokohama that can find the unfindable_, thought Art, _and because the Healing Minimum exists only in legend, which would make it a perfect job for your description._

The question is too specific to be entirely theoretical.

Nice sulks in the silence.

"C'mon," he says, and makes a motion almost like he's nudging. "It's not going to make a difference, because I've already nearly found it."

Whatever Art opens his mouth to say, he forgets in surprise. "It _exists?"_

"Well, yeah." Pause. "Kind of. Maybe. Sure." Art opens his mouth again, but Nice ploughs on. "Who cares? What's wrong with answering? I'm just trying to kill time until we get back over here."

The reassurance isn't reassuring enough to Art, but Nice is incredibly earnest, and Nice is in possession of a lead that Art requires. Art supposes he can humour him for one last time.

"Hospitals," says Art.

Nice is swinging his umbrella again. "Hmm?"

"I would check hospitals," Art clarifies, then takes a moment to collect the rest of his thoughts. "Question staff. Conduct interviewsâ€¦ search for contacts, assistance, and leads."

"But what if you can't find anything in any of them?"

"There are always stories and rumours to follow."

"Huh. So that your Superintendent's methodology."

A movement in the corner of Art's eye causes him to turn around. Nice is tapping at the bridge of his nose thoughtfully.

"Is there a problem?" asks Art.

"Not really," says Nice. "It makes sense that you'd think someone with a Healing Minimum would have connections to a hospital, but I don't do that. Mao and I try to stay as far away from you public service guys as possible."

"How would you approach this, then?"

"Well, rumours and miracle stories first. Thenâ€¦ you've noticed, right? Whenever a Minimum is involved, there's always something that's missing. Craters without explosives. Fire without tinder." Nice shrugs. "How I work, I hunt for that. Whatever I don't have. That's where I go."

"That would be extremely inefficient," says Art.

"Maybe for you," Nice agrees. "But you're also under paperwork and jurisdiction."

There it is again: The reminder that Nice works outside the law.

"Anyway," says Nice, "thanks for your input."

Art checks his watch, has another glance at his phone, and the police building rises from the skyline.

â€"

10: before I sleep (_i dream_)

â€"

The first hint that he's dreaming is when he's aware of a distant sound, recognisable as the beat of footsteps in the corridor.

"Hey, Artâ€" "

Art wakes up with his head against his elbow and the fabric of his dress shirt pulled taut across his shoulders. There's a sheaf of paper between his fingers, bent against the surface of his desk, and when he lifts his head to blink blearily and glance around, the computer screen beside him is blank and sleeping.

He tries to remember what he'd been doing; one glance down reveals Sakiyama Seiji, and carries with it the memory that, as one of its prime agents, he'd been writing a report for the faceless officials in the Minimum Agency.

Gasquet pauses at the doorway. He's hovering with worry. He enters when Art starts to rearrange his hair.

"Is something the matter, Mr. Gasquet?" says Art.

The question is ignored. "Thinking about the same thing?"

Art can't tell what he's referring to, but assumes by the gaze toward his desk drawer that he's talking about Skill. The reminder about Skill's death anniversary clings messily to his conscience, a stain never harder to wash away.

(_Except_ â€" he hadn't dreamt about Skill.)

"Yes," Art lies.

There's a sigh. Gasquet tosses another bundle of papers toward Art, then turns around so he's leaning on the edge of the table.

"Those are the reports you wanted on suspicious activity in the area, circa two years ago," he says. "I sincerely doubt there's any relevance in pursuing Sakiyama there."

â€"_a man, approx. 170cm, brown hair and blue eyesâ€"_, a segment reads, when Art moves to take them.

[_Iâ€| looked you up. Two years ago._]

"You can never be too sure," Art replies.

Hopefully, Gasquet wouldn't notice that the area included Art's apartment, in addition to including the police station.

Art's on the third page when Gasquet sighs again.

"Can I not convince you to take time off early?" he asks.

"I have work I need to do," says Art.

"And you have sleep you should be doing."

"My week off begins in two days."

"That's no reason it can't begin now."

Art pauses. "With all due respect, Mr. Gasquet, Iâ€"

"Alright, alright." Gasquet slides his shoulders back to shrug with his hands, and Art idly wonders which of the officers he'd picked that habit up from, because Gasquet hasn't shrugged with his hands before. "Can't say I didn't try."

Art chose not to mention that Gasquet's been trying for days.

"Thank you for your concern," says Art.

Gasquet waves a hand dismissively. "Don't thank me. Actually, can I borrow your car for a couple of days?"

"Pardon?"

"I need to move some belongings b'tween here and my cousin's place in Tokyo. You won't be needing it when you're off, no?"

"Notâ€| particularly," admits Art.

Gasquet leans closer. A sudden bristling runs up and down Art's back, beneath his jacket.

"So I_ can _borrow it?" says Gasquet.

Art tries to shake it, but he can't escape the notion that he's being pushed against a wall.

"Iâ€| don't see why not," says Art. The wall grows arms and wraps around him; Art breaks its grasp with the power of logic. "I can take public transport home tomorrow. Please be careful. Don't smoke inside. Avoid dirtying the interior."

Gasquet laughs.

"Have some more faith in me, Art," he says.

I do, thinks Art. Gasquet is Gasquet, who's always helped and always had his best interests at heart. Still, his smile hangs fragile, balanced precariously off the edge of his emotions. It must be the remains of Sakiyama's influence contributing to his paranoia.

Art decides to attend the next available courses at the Police Academy in order to refresh his education and guard him from that in the future.

He returns to the predictability of his paperwork, and doesn't dare shift his smile to reply.

â€"

On the first day, Art wakes up and conducts his usual morning routine, only to reach for his missing car keys and remember, somewhat belatedly, that he wasn't expected at Headquarters unless an emergency occurred or after seven days.

The knowledge paralyses him. Art hasn't had so much time to himself since *Facultas* â€" before he realised that, unless he spent every waking hour studying, he wouldn't be able to stay.

Art wanders aimlessly around his apartment, looking for something, anything. The floors are clean, and so is his kitchen. His bed is made, the sheets are fresh; he'd changed them less than a week ago. The long, cold fishtank empty against one wall; an impulse purchase that he could fill; but once he returns to work he won't have time to care for fish, not when he sometimes forgets to feed himself.

There's a bill on the counter. More paperwork. It's due in a month.

Art tries to deal with it but finds he isn't allowed.

Art decides not to call, taking it instead as an excuse to visit a branch personally.

â€"

A few hours later, he's across the road from *CafÃ© Nowhere*.

Yokohama isn't a city difficult to navigate without a car. It's large enough that walking from end to end would take half a day on foot, but its web of public transport is extensive and, though crowded, there are many options available. Art knows of them, but doesn't use them regularly enough to be familiar.

He discovered the branch is closed for the New Year. There are many festivities, but he isn't in the mood for celebrating; instead, he'd been following the instructions on his phone in search of a book store. Art would make his visits to Skill's grave count; not so rarely to be neglecting, not so often for them to lose meaning. Skill would have appreciated Art talking to him about some hobby, even if Art had only picked it up to assuage his brother's worry.

Less than five minutes after getting off the bus, Art finds he's recognising the street as one he's walked before. He doesn't know what he's expecting when he looks up.

Art finds *CafÃ© Nowhere* watching him back.

The door is ajar, casting shadows across the entryway. Sunlight illuminates the windows a blinding white and bleaches the warmth from

brick walls. A moat of traffic divides them, with rushing cars and rapid engine growls, steeds of knights guarding a distant castle. It's nothing like it'd been in the rain, door closed but signs with arms wide open and keen to usher its visitors inside.

It's nothing like it'd been when he was with Nice.

They'd shared an umbrella, awkwardly. Art remembers the sound of his breath and the rhythms of his walk. Nice had entered Art's life as the fake deliveryman wearing earphones, in possession of a piece of evidence crucial to the arrest of Tachikawa Kenta. He'd warned. Helped. All in exchange for frivolitiesâ€"

Frivolities in exchange for behaviour that never considered personal consequences or the law.

Art hesitates.

Already, CafÃ© Nowhere has forgotten him. Nice would have forgotten him too.

Art's tried, and tried. Skill should be the only thing on his mind; Skill, and finding those who'd taken his life, to make up for the world's injustice.

But thoughts of Nice won't go away.

Art looks back to his phone for further instructions. He unlocks the screen, but instead of being greeted by directions, he's met with the reminder he'd jotted down.

Find Miraki Lending. Hajime met with James Shunsuke?

Art pauses.

It's a long time before he turns around and pursues his curiosity.

â€"

Birthday's burnt more calories that week than he's ever burnt in an entire month.

Probably.

He's lost track of how many times he's gone on a walk to calm his head, watching Ratio lose track of time as he tries to adjust to a sleeping schedule where days are nothing but timeslots spread across naps few and far between. But Birthday's been on a lot of walks â€" until one of his legs kept cramping, and Birthday's been stuck at home.

Ratio'd asked Birthday to help wake him up, to prevent him from oversleeping.

Birthday's of the very clear opinion that surviving on four thirty-minute naps are undersleeping.

(Birthday figures he's lost more than enough calories stressing over Ratio.)

Today is day eight. It's eleven in the morning, and Ratio's shifts leave him with the time off. They'd run out of coffee earlier.

Birthday forgot to mention it, and it was 5 AM when Ratio discovered it the hard way.

"G'night, Ratio," says Birthday, trying to hide his grimace behind a smile as he pretends to tuck Ratio in.

Ratio opens an eye to look at Birthday. There's an incredible bag beneath it, from the first day, when Ratio'd gone without sleep for twenty-four hours to force himself into the schedule. It's faded enough to no longer look like a parasite had gone and attached itself to Ratio's face, but not enough that Ratio doesn't look like he's grimacing back.

I'm sorry I haven't found your cure yet, says the gaze.

Birthday opens his mouth, tries to say, Do you think I want you to ruin your life just to try and save mine?, but he's promised to wake Ratio up in half an hour. New Year or not, Ratio's already scheduled his day with margins so tight they might as well not exist. He'd made sure that Birthday knows. If Birthday starts to argue, Ratio will be down a quarter of his daily sleep.

Ratio'd be awake, after half an hour of sleep, from 5 AM all until the evening.

"Sleep tight," Birthday says instead.

Thank you, Ratio closes his eye and says wordlessly.

Ratio falls asleep, and Birthday's by his side, watching the time tick down twice as fast as normal. It's like the microwave effect, but in reverse. It's not the first time Birthday's wished that Ratio's naps passed according to microwave time.

"But I have promises to keep," Ratio'd told him.

Birthday leans back and falls lifelessly into his chair. The back digs into the base of his spine. Birthday doesn't care.

They'd been twelve, when Birthday said he wanted a cure, and Birthday had been joking.

"I hate this," he mutters to himself, but he's really talking about himself and the world and everything in between. "Fuck. I wish you'd realise that sometimes there are promises that aren't worth keeping."

â€"

Art's first impression of Miraki Lending is that it is incredibly clean.

The signage is fresh, colours bold. Glass gleams in the light without a trace of a scratch or of any stain. Painted surfaces are unclouded. Both buildings to either side are injured, presenting chipped bricks

plastered with ghostly tape remains.

Then Art walks closer and sees the marks on the walls change direction several times, and wonders how many times it's been renovated because the building is not one that is new.

Before he's given the chance to touch the handle, the door opens. Behind it is a giant of a man with wild blond hair spilling over a dark suit. He has a great scar on his face in the shape of an X. Art notes instantly the cut of his clothes and how he shows no sign of making any movements toward his own body. It's unlikely he's concealing weaponry, but Art doesn't doubt the man's size and muscles would be more than enough to compensate should he need them.

"Welcome to Miraki Lending," says the giant.

The voice is harsh. Art hears the kind undertone for what it is.

"Thank you," says Art.

"If you would like to enquire about a loan, the President will be here shortlyâ€"

"I'm looking to speak with a Miss Hajime."

All of a sudden, Art's path is blocked. The giant has shifted with barely any warning. The lack of signals and the defensive action causes Art to mirror the giant's tense posture unconsciously.

"Hajime isâ€|" The giant hesitates. "Why do you wish to speak with her?"

Art decides to take the blunt approach. "She helped save my life."

A flash of something passes through the giant's eyes â€" but before Art gets an opportunity to read it, they're interrupted by soft footfalls. Hajime emerges, tiny beside the giant's grand stature. The giant takes half a step back to give her access.

It didn't take long until Hajime spots Art. She gasps, curls her lips into her teeth. Her dull gaze flickers with the bitter taint of apprehension, and even the bandage over one eye doesn't manage to halve the reaction.

"Why are you here?" demands Hajime. She takes a sharp breath, then repeats monotone as if she were a recording, "Why are you here?"

"Iâ€|"

Art fumbles for words he no longer knows. At some point, he'd expected her to be like Nice; brighter, more playful. He'd already been off-balance, having to approach a day without the rigour of routine to guide him. Such a cold response threw him even more.

Hajime must have sensed that Art wouldn't be able to say anything.

She turns and looks up to the giant beside her.

"Three," she says. "If the President asks, I am on a short walk. Alone."

The giant "Three" nods, though his brows are drawn in confusion. "I understand."

Hajime brushes past him and gives Art a sharp look instructing him to follow.

Art obliges.

He has no idea where they're going, and the streets change little, although the density of the people on its sidewalks begins to increase. Where there'd been a couple of people every handful of steps, there were now five. Ten. Dozens mostly young adults, below the age of forty; once walking and moving alongside them, now starting to slow to a standstill. The low hum of distant conversations surrounding them begins to intensify.

And then the street opens into a loud shopping district filled with people.

Masks behind counters watch as Hajime pushes past, eyeing the groups of people. Art hurries his pace and concentrates on the peak of white from her cap, short against her surroundings. Hajime shows no sign of stopping. Art pushes through the crowd, which had settled back after she'd moved them, in order not to lose her.

Stalls selling clothes make way for displays of trinkets. The crowds briefly thin. They reach an intersection that leads to a food strip.

Hajime slows. Art stops beside her, and he finds his stomach has tensed. He takes a deep breath to return the wind to his lungs, forces himself to relax, and looks ahead into the strip. Dense, fragrant smoke hangs between the buildings on either side, carries to their noses with the help of a soft breeze. Art realises he hasn't eaten all morning. Have some lunch before you continue, it beckons.

Hajime shifts by his elbow, and Art wonders if he'll be asked to treat her.

"You can't visit me," she says, suddenly.

Given by her reaction, Art has guessed as much already. "Is there a reason for that?"

"Yes."

Hajime doesn't elaborate any further. She turns around, away from the food, and starts walking again. Her pace is no longer as swift, and Art is able to walk beside her.

"What do you want?" she says, once a block has passed.

"I wanted to thank you," says Art. "Nice told me you weren't scheduled to visit Sato on the day I was attacked."

Hajime makes a movement like she's shaking her head, but as soon as Art turns to look, the movement is gone. For a while, she says nothing. Then, Art is no longer next to her; the cadence in her steps change unexpectedly, and she overtakes him.

"â€|nothing," Art hears her say.

Her arms tuck into herself and she shakes her head again. Hajime's wake grows; the crowds are still in their way, but now they've noticed that Art and Hajime are together, so they part pre-emptively to allow him through after her.

"Are you also from Facultas?" asks Art, when it becomes evident she wouldn't continue.

"â€|Yes."

"Which class were you in? Your third languageâ€|"

"Unregistered," says Hajime. She doesn't turn around. "That's whyâ€| I won't be in it, your directory."

"How did youâ€|"

"Nice talks in his sleep."

Art files the knowledge away. Nice's ability to retain information isn't as secure as Art had assumed.

"You'reâ€| looking for Nice, aren't you?" says Hajime.

"I'm not," says Art, without hesitation, confident in the truth. "I only have some questions regarding your associations at Miraki Lending."

There's a pause. Hajime stops, turns around. She scrutinises Art carefully. Though her stare is carefully emotionless, there's a suspicion, there; no effort is made to hide how her eyes are ripping him apart. An idea occurs to him, that Hajime is keeping her emotions beneath a certain threshold.

Art realises he's holding his breath.

Somehow, not knowing the full extent of Hajime's emotions is somehow more terrifying than if they were on full display.

"Liar," she says.

I'm not lying.

The words don't go spoken.

"Stay out," Hajime continues. "Nice doesn'tâ€| he doesn't need you. He doesn't need anyone who wants him only for what he can do."

"I'm not looking for Nice," says Art. "What connection do you have to Facultas? Do you â€" Would you know anything about strange events on the 7th of January, four years ago?"

Hajime pauses. Art wonders if she's about to leave.

Then, she stares at him and says: "Miraki Lending has nothing to do with Skill."

â€"

"Are you alright?" are the first words from Three's mouth when Hajime returns.

Hajime barely spares him a glance, but commits the concern to memory. Concern could lead to guilt. Does he believe he's in her debt? It's a tie she'll need to watch and tear down if it ever became a necessity.

"The President?" she says.

"President Okura enquired approximately four minutes ago. Iâ€! responded as you asked."

"Thank you."

"Where did you go?"

Somewhere with Minimum, thinks Hajime.

Hajime doesn't reply. She tentatively lifts the bandage over her eye, and gives a small sigh of relief when the x-ray patterns of blue and white appear around her.

Of course, Three notices the sigh.

"Are you alright?" he asks again.

Hajime shakes her head dismissively, making clear her lack of interest in answering. She'd achieved what she'd set out to in her meeting with Art. Even if Nice isâ€"

Even if Artâ€

Pressure rises in the back of Hajime's mind, accompanied by the memory of phantom needles and distant injections. She can't finish the thoughts. Her right eye pulses as a reminder about how she can't make another mistake. They're dangerous to consider at the current time.

The growths are pruned, swiftly, before they begin to consume.

Pruning is easiest when it's done all together. Allâ€! at once.

"You're getting soft, Three," says Hajime. She makes her way inside. "Forget himâ€! he owes me nothing."

â€"

Art stands there, watching the spot where Hajime'd disappeared into the crowd. His heart has made its way to his throat, beating frantically against his empty chest; locked out, refused re-entry.

The crowds part around him, this island alone in the waves of people.

Stay out.

Miraki Lending has nothing to do with Skill.

Isn't that more than what he's wanted? A clue, a clean break, to forget Nice, toâ€|

[_Liar._]

"Art," Hajime'd said before leaving. There is no friend in how she pronounced his name. "There is a lot that Nice doesn't knowâ€| if you take advantage of that I will kill you. Skill's death is not by â€" _not byâ€_ Iâ€"" she gasped and raised a hand to her throat, "I can't say. You are searching wrong. Hopefullyâ€| we never need to meet again."

Art forgets to visit the book store.

â€"

Moral knocks politely on the young teacher's door, umbrella hanging off his wrist and the grip of his shiny golden revolver in his palm. It's late enough that nobody is awake, but it's also late enough that it happens to be three in the morning.

Moral isn't particularly worried, or anything. Momoka's records say that Kitazawa Yasuo is usually awake at the time.

After a minute or so, the door opens, and a half-naked man frowns suspiciously into the corridor.

"Good morning," says Moral, shielded by the umbrella.

He fires. Gunpowder and blood splatter and combine on the clear plastic. Kitazawa's eyes are deliciously wide. It's always wonderful to see others respecting his power.

Kitazawa isn't dead yet, because he's scrambling for something, but Moral's more than prepared. He forces the door open and steps inside. Before the door is closed and any pesky neighbours wake up to investigate, Moral reaches inside his carry-bag and tosses a handful of spent firecracker casings behind him.

There isn't a body in the hallway. Kitazawa's probably trying to call for help, or trying to put his illicit pictures on the cloud, or something. What an exquisite Minimum. He'll find out that his phone and internet plans would all have stopped working.

Moral wonders if he should remove his shoes, and changes his mind. He drops what he's holding and claps his hands.

"Happy New Year!"

Too bad hide and seek isn't fun with a trail of blood to lead him.

* * *

><p>TBC/**

13. 11

One month? ...I tried.

Content warning level: High, probably

* * *

><p>Last time:

"_Art," Hajime'd said before leaving. There is no friend in how she pronounced his name. "There is a lot that Nice doesn't know... if you take advantage of that I will kill you. Skill's death is not by "not by" I"" she gasped and raised a hand to her throat, "I can't say. You are searching wrong. Hopefully... we never need to meet again."_

* * *

><p>"Good morning," says Moral, shielded by the umbrella.

_He fires. Gunpowder and blood splatter combine on the clear plastic. Moral wonders if he should remove his shoes, and changes his mind. He drops what he's holding and claps his hands. _

"_Happy New Year!"_

Too bad hide and seek isn't fun with a trail of blood to lead him.

* * *

><p>It's 5:51 AM when Art receives the call.<p>

The apartment building he's to visit is less than ten minutes from his place at a walk. Art throws on his suit, grabs some toast and runs, dodging doors and walls and people and cars. He makes it in five.

There's a cordon fenced by police tape already set up " and in front, Inspector Rune is waiting.

His small figure appears wider and shorter than usual, the base of his dark jacket lying in line with the black stripe of a police van. Reading glasses sit perched on his nose and a book is open in his hands. It's a police handbook, standard-issue.

Art takes one look at how Rune's gaze is fixed beyond the handbook's pages, and knows he's looking ahead with the Telescopic Minimum.

Art glances past Rune and up to the balcony. Uniformed forensics are already loitering at the entrance to each residence, examining the area around each of the tiny front doors. Behind them further still, the sun sets the world alight as it begins its journey across the sky.

Rune notices Art's approach. He closes the book, tucks his glasses into one pocket, and salutes. Art's attention is drawn back down.

"Superintendent," greets Rune. Every inch of him is the obedient officer; back straight, clothes neatly pressed. Only tousled hair and a backwards tie reveal the hour.

Art quickly checks his mouth for traces of crumbs, then rubs his hands to ward off a sudden chill. His own tie is crumpled and likely fares no better.

"How is it?" says Art.

"Everything matches the usual M.O., so far," Rune replies. "I looked ahead. The victim's brain is removed and there's an exceptional amount of blood. There's no doubt it's him again."

The Minimum Holder Serial Killer.

"Except..." adds Rune.

"Except?"

"I looked into the room with the body. It's been more than seventy-two hours since the time of death."

He saw at least three days of decomposition. All the other bodies were in locations that ensured their discovery in no later than two.

"Could it be caution?" Art wonders aloud.

Rune's mouth is a grim slash. "Perhaps he's changed his objective."

Art doesn't realise he's sighed until he hears it himself. It's tainted with frustration, ripping away the part of his heart he'd dedicated to his job; a part of himself stolen before his eyes. Powerlessness. It's been over a year since the serial killer moved for the first time.

It's been exactly four years since Skill's death.

He's been called off leave on the one day he promised to visit him.

Never more aware of how much he's tugged around by the serial killer's whims, Art forces himself to swallow back the loss of life. He tries not to dwell on how depraved a person would have to be, and lodges his heart back into place.

There's a job to do.

"Gasquet isn't here?" asks Art, because he would have expected Gasquet to be the one meeting him.

"He was in Tokyo," says Rune. "It will be half an hour until he arrives."

Art nods. "Thank you for coordinating."

Rune bows slightly. "It was no trouble."

"Has the Agency sent any instructions?"

"The transfer plans have been finalised — you will be moved to Saitama once your term ends. I'm to increase my activity before I'm due for promotion. Handover should run smoothly. You will have a new handler assigned to you then."

"Do you know who it is?"

"Hopefully it will be the Viscous Minimum Holder, Clear." Rune pauses. "My older sister."

Art barely spares a blink. Given the rarity of the Minimum, siblings with Minimums weren't common, but neither were they rare. Even with all the years of Minimum research, no genetic links have been identified.

It's one area Art tries to remain informed in.

"That's good to know," says Art without missing a beat. "If that's the case, I'm sure I'll enjoy working with her."

Rune nods and looks toward an approaching officer. They talk about moving people to an area for questioning. Art pays attention with only half a mind. Rune is the shortest of the group, barely reaching Art's eye-level, and Art wonders how old he is. Old enough to graduate, given his place in the elite course and his promotion to Inspector.

Skill would be seventeen. He wouldn't have graduated even if he were still alive.

"—Superintendent?"

Art blinks and finds Rune looking up at him. At some point, the officer had left, and Art had slipped too far into his own thoughts to notice. One of Art's hands hover in mid-air, reaching toward Rune.

Art blinks again. He drops his arm. The images of snowy hair and purple eyes vanish to be replaced by dirty blond and green.

"S-Sorry," says Art. "Could you repeat that again?"

If Rune is irritated at the request, no trace of it appears in his expression.

"The current status of this investigation is that it is still preliminary. Forensics have yet to report. Our detectives have just met with the residents and the local officers have been dismissed back to their posting."

The passing of command is acknowledged with another nod. "They're witnesses?"

"Still unknown."

"Thank you." Inhale; collect his thoughts. Exhale; there's no time to be thinking about Skill. "We'll have to split duties. I'll take over questioning. Can I have you looking into the victim?"

Salute. "Understood, sir."

Art deliberates with himself for a moment. He makes up his mind as soon as the Inspector turns away.

"...Rune?" he says.

Rune stops. He swivels around. "Sir?"

"Want to go for a drink before I'm transferred?"

For a long moment, Rune doesn't reply. He stiffens. His fingers tap against the spine of the handbook tucked beneath his arm. Art suppresses the crawling doubt suggesting that the silence is why he never thinks of initiating meetings outside of work. The doubt squirms under his grip. It rears back. Rune mightn't be old enough for drinking at all.

It's managed to convince Art into searching for words by the time Rune's mouth stretches into a slow smile.

"Sounds interesting," is Rune's reply. "I hope you know somewhere with some hard vodka."

Art doesn't. He hardly drinks.

The doubt fizzles away and a chill descends with something like uncertainty.

* * *

><p>11: Tea Party Tango

* * *

><p>There's a bridge at one end of town, an old thing hewn at the edges and etched with tired lines. To get below it, one has to circle around the back of a building, pass through a parking lot where a row of cars slept without passengers to escort, and walk a flight of steps which ducked around once, into itself. Only then would the shadows proceed to hide and swallow you whole.<p>

There must be something wet up high, thinks Theo, when yet another droplet of water lands _splat_ into his hair. It trickles downward, down the back of his head and down his neck and then all the way beneath his shirt, leaving a trail of unpleasant wetness behind on its journey to the centre of the Earth.

The bridge is Theo's place. A special place. It's wet and cold sometimes, and completely miserable, but that just means that nobody really goes so often. Rei doesn't know about it either.

That's the most important thing.

Another drop plops down; another stream down his back; Theo wonders if he should move, but thinks the better of it since he'd just gotten comfortable.

Besides. Moving meant...

Moving meant he'll start wondering why he's skipping school again.

"It's not my fault," he almost says aloud, but well, it is. It's Theo's choice to ditch, even though Rei'll keep it hush-hush for a while. She'll be concerned, but she also knows how much Theo hates any blemishes getting to his parents. Plus, there's a general, unspoken student code where Our Things are Our Things, and in a public school where only 5% ever made it after graduation, Nobody Gets Adults Involved.

It fuelled the need for the Reverse Site. It intensified multifold after.

[You make me sick.]

Nobody Gets Adults Involved.

[Just die.]

Except Theo.

"You're pathetic."

"I know," says Theo.

It's been at least two weeks since he heard the Voice for the first time. He'd lose track of everything in the world except himself. Rei'd tell him that he'd space out, sometimes for several minutes. All he knows is that everyone around him disappears, like they'd all been teleported away from the scene, leaving only himself and the demons that haunted him.

Theo's only found one way to escape the trance. It'd hit once when he was in the middle of the road, and Rei'd grabbed his arm because he'd stopped.

"Are you okay?" she asked, once they were safely on the sidewalk.

Theo realised she was holding his hand and tugged it free.

"I'm fine," he'd replied. "I'llâ€"I'll be fine. I will."

(Rei's worried frown said that she didn't believe him.)

Theo hears the Voice laugh. The humour wraps itself around him and the snide edge cuts into his sense of security. "Looks like she's abandoned you."

Theo buries his head deeper into his arms and doesn't reply.

"You won't find Kitazawa-sensei like this," adds the Voice. "What can you tell him? 'Sensei, please help me!'" A false falsetto. Nails

clawing at Theo's chalkboard support. "'Sensei, sensei! I'm being bullied, wahhh, and it's by myself!'_ What a joke."

Above him, the sounds of people on the streets registers again. All Theo can do is wish his world will be back to normal as well.

* * *

><p>Thirty minutes pass, and Gasquet isn't there. One hour, and Art is still doing his job for him. By the time Gasquet arrives, it's well past nine, and Art's been on scene for more than three hours and closing up his last round of questioning.</p>

Gasquet waits for Art to finish, listening silently, then says, "Sorry I'm late."

Art's annoyance had long transformed into worry. When Art turns around and sees Gasquet's charismatic smile, worry washes away under a wave of relief â€“ and with it comes a sudden clarity in the world around him. Art welcomes the focus and can almost form a smile in return.

He doesn't.

He'd received the crime scene photos earlier.

Art decides to forego the chatter and gets down to business immediately. He inclines his head towards the police van, indicating they should talk and walk, then sets ahead. Gasquet follows.

"It's another missing brain incident," says Art.

Gasquet's lips twitch. He purses them, preventing the emotion from materialising completely. "A while this time, isn't it? Our killer's getting sneaky."

"Unusually," says Art. "The likely time of death was on the first of January. The residents reported hearing loud sounds early in the morning. A few investigated â€“ upon finding firecracker remains, they assumed the victim was celebrating. It's another level of subterfuge we haven't seen before."

"And the vic?"

"A teacher at Yokohamabane High School known as Kitazawa Yasuo." Art nods absently at a passing officer. "Most of his information is obscured that way in the residents' register."

"Ex-Facultas," says Gasquet.

"Ex-Facultas," confirms Art. "One who won't be in the directory because he managed to change his name. Rune is in contact with the Agency and sorting out the paperwork."

"With any luck, we'll be able to get his personal information in a month," says Gasquet, and snickers.

Art doesn't think too deeply into the strange laughter. He knows that Gasquet is trying to lighten a dreadful situation.

A small smile finds its way to Art's face. "Perhaps it will arrive promptly this time."

"How'd they discover the body?" says Gasquet.

"One of the residents noticed an odd, persisting smell."

"Blood."

"Directly behind the door," says Art. "That blood trail led to the victim's bedroom, where his computer was, before crossing to the bathroom. An entirely separate trail is centralised around the kitchen. That may be where the brain was removed. Forensics has made a map I would brief you on the rest of the situation, butâ€"

"Superintendent!"

Someone almost crashes into Art as they leap out of the van. Art automatically takes a step back to create distance, then he drops the hand that had reached for his pistol when he identifies Rune. By then, Rune has already composed himself, and is saluting.

Before either Art or Gasquet could give any response, he's started talking.

"The hard drive's been decoded," says Rune, tripping over the words.

Art stops. "What?"

"They found the key," says Rune. "Kitazawa wrote it in his diary."

"That's fortunate," says Art.

Rune's eyes pinch as if he wants to choose another, less gracious word, but he says nothing.

"Hate to interrupt," says Gasquet, "but mind explaining to an old man?"

It's because Art is looking at Rune that he's able to catch the brief frown that Rune sends in Gasquet's direction.

"Kitazawa's files were encrypted, and he left a failsafe to ensure he could decrypt them." Rune tells him. "You attended the class, did you not?"

"Eh? ... 'Course. Just got confused for a sec, my bad."

"How long will it take to document the contents?" asks Art.

Rune turns back to Art. "Several days," he replies.

"And a search?"

"Seconds less than a minute. If they are not indexed we can begin indexing them now. You are thinking of...?"

Art nods in affirmation. "Gasquet and I will visit Yokohamabane High School. I'll leave supervision of this half to you."

"Understood."

"Please inform me if the Agency contacts you again."

Rune bows.

"If anything happens, sir, I'll let you know."

* * *

><p>"He's a good kid," comments Gasquet.</p>

They're making their way to Art's car, which Gasquet'd brought on arrival. There isn't a long walk; it's parked directly next to the van. Gasquet's watching Rune, who is still saluting at them outside the mobile unit. Art had looked up to see who it is that Gasquet is referring to.

Gasquet misses the opportunity to tell Art about the large box in the front seat until Art's already circled around to the passenger side and opened the door.

"Mr. Gasquet..." says Art.

"Ah," says Gasquet, glancing at Art. "That's stuff from my cousin's. If you give me a sec, I can move themâ€"

Even though Gasquet'd volunteered, Art can't help but think about having to move it himself. Art realises why Gasquet'd needed his car; it's quite a large box, almost a metre long in each dimension, held back by a seatbelt, and sinks into the leather chair even with a mat beneath it.

The moment Art wonders how heavy it is, he's doused by a wave of fatigue. He checks the time to see how long he's been awake. Only the date registers in his brain.

Art tries not to think about how he's missing Skill's death day.

"It'sâ€"it's fine," says Art. "I'll take the back. Can you drive? I need â€" I need to rest my eyes."

"'Course I can," says Gasquet.

It's strange opening the back door, and even stranger foraying into the part of his car he normally doesn't see; Art pauses, because the angle of the seat doesn't feel quite right against his back, but he still closes the door behind him and tries to make himself comfortable. By the time the echo from Gasquet closing the driver side door dissipates within the interior, Art's eyes have already slipped closed and his head hangs lifelessly.

A comfortable lull settles in once Gasquet begins driving. They reverse and turn. The tyres send vibrations up Art's side, and Art's

head shifts into a more comfortable position.

They're well into their journey when a thought occurs.

"Mr. Gasquet?" says Art.

"Hmm?"

"Do you know any places selling good vodka in Yokohama?"

"Vodka?" Curiosity enters Gasquet's tone. "What's that about?"

"Inspector Rune is a fan."

To Art's surprise, Gasquet releases a barking laugh. "Rune? That's funny, who'd've thought. Did you ask him out?"

"I... did," says Art.

"What a wonderful development! Rune is excellent at following instructions, a very good choice for you. But I'd watch out for his sister, _mhmm..._"

Art's eyes snap open. He doesn't know if he expects to see her, this sister who was to replace Rune as his handler in slightly over six months' time, but he's greeted with the sight of the door on one side and the unreadable back of Gasquet's head on the other.

"Clear?" asks Art.

"Yep."

"You've met her? What is she like?"

"Very protective. Very silly."

"Silly?"

"She tried to hide him, you know? Rune. Clear was scared he'd show potential because she didn't want him attending Facultas too."

"But they discovered him."

"Yep," the easy reply. "So that's why he was able to attend while four years too old."

The car slows for a red light. Art pauses, grabs the pieces he feels hovering beyond his grasp, inspects them closely and forces them together. By the time the car stops, he's already reached his conclusion.

"...They make concessions for siblings?" Art says.

"Of course." Gasquet is nodding to himself. "Minimum siblings are invaluable study subjects, after all."

"...Ah."

Art tries not to think what it means in regards to his graduation and

makes a note to leave it for later.

"How did Clear take it?" asks Art.

Gasquet is examining something one of his hands. "She broke."

He doesn't say more once the light changes to green. With a jolt, the vehicle starts moving again. There's something strange about it â€“ now that he's sitting behind Gasquet and doesn't have a view to distract him, Art finally notices how roughly Gasquet is driving. His acceleration isn't as smooth, and when he turns the steering wheel, it's with stiffer movements of his arms.

Is something wrong?

"Mr. Gasquet..." begins Art, before he's aware he's formed the name himself.

"Hmm?" says Gasquet.

Art hesitates. He isn't sure why he'd called out for his partner.

He's silent for too long. Gasquet tilts his head and gives Art a quick glance, even though he's driving.

"What's up, Art?"

"I..." A lead drifts past his conscious. Art snatches it. "I didn't know you knew so much."

There's a pause.

Finally, Gasquet responds: "I try to stay updated with interesting Minimum."

(Something is wrong.)

There's no opportunity for Art to pursue the idea, because the car stops again. Gasquet checks the mirrors, and Art looks out the window. As virtually all the public school buildings in Japan are identical in design, Art is able to identify the building immediately. A sign on the edge of the premises confirms his suspicions: they've arrived at Yokohamabane High.

"What's our game plan?" says Gasquet.

"We notify the principal and gather the teachers for questioning," Art replies. "Then we'll ask them to search for anyone whoâ€"

[_There's one person in Yokohama that can find the unfindable._]

Before the new thread of thought breaks his old, Art quickly tries to focus on the street outside; he eyes the criss-cross of sidewalk tiles, and follows the lines. But his gaze wavers. He thinks of finding the Healing Minimum â€“ of Nice pursuing rumours in search of miracles where Art would enquire with hospital staff first â€“

[_So that's your Superintendent's methodology._]

"â€" and the thread winds around Art ever tighter.

"...No," says Art, correcting himself. "We'll move to asking the students directly and find out if anybody has been acting strange after the New Year when the semester began."

"Is that really a good idea?" The car is parked and Gasquet looks outside. "This isn't a small school."

"That's... a good point. We can't interrupt for too long. I'llâ€"I'll leave my number for anyone to contact me."

"I was thinking the hotlineâ€" "

Gasquet turns around. Under that gaze, Art wraps a hand around the door handle next to him.

"Not fast enough," says Art. He smiles reassuringly. "It's fine. If the worst happens I can get a new number." He doesn't mention he's been meaning to, ever since Nice called his phone.

Gasquet shakes his head, resigned. "If you say so."

* * *

><p>"Here."</p>

Murasaki has no time to react before a bag is dropped onto his desk. Its contents clatter, and its sides droop around the silhouette of two boxy forms. Murasaki looks up further to see Honey peering down. She's holding a bento box of her own between her fingers, and clicks her tongue with an irritated frown.

Without asking, Honey props herself up against the desk, hooks her toes around the arm of a nearby chair, then pulls it closer to use as a footrest. The chair belonged to a colleague who'd left on his lunch break.

Murasaki glances at the time, wondering when he'd return, and notices that Honey's fifteen minutes later than usual.

"Did something happen?" he says idly, returning to the document on his computer screen.

Honey slides her chopsticks from their flimsy paper covering before popping her bento box's plastic seal. "Some kid tried to ask me out."

"Ah," says Murasaki.

He types. Honey's chopsticks snap beside him.

"The chocolates are in there," she says, nudging the bag. "I don't eat white chocolate. If you don't want them, toss them."

Murasaki nods wordlessly and continues typing. Honey starts eating, one leg pushing the chair back and forth, a blur at the edge of Murasaki's vision that would quickly become annoying if it weren't already.

"Am I supposed to ask you how it went?" asks Murasaki.

"If you want," says Honey, dry. "The kid had the tackiest whistle. What a disaster."

Murasaki isn't particularly interested either. He makes a sound of acknowledgement, and tries to ignore her.

He finds out why Honey is hovering once he's saved the file and sent it away.

"Are you free later?" says Honey.

One hand buried in the bag, trying to tease his lunch out from beneath the box of chocolates, Murasaki gives her a sideways glance. "Are you asking me out?"

"No. Are you free?"

"I think so," says Murasaki. "Why?"

"I'm not. I... need a favour."

"Of what sort?"

Honey pauses. "I'm low on lollipops."

It's a need so closely tied with the use of her _(much, much more valuable)_ Minimum that Murasaki raises an eyebrow.

"Wouldn't management handle that?" he says.

"Do you think they _care?_" Honey shoots back. "No. I can't. They'd â€“ they'd probably ruin the order or something just to save money."

Automatically, Murasaki looks up to where their manager sits â€“ beside the lifts and near the doorway â€“ and sees the man tapping on his phone without any awareness of his surroundings at all.

He looks back to Honey again.

Perhaps there's some amount of scepticism still present in his expression, because Honey sighs and rolls her eyes.

"Look: don't even worry about why," she says. "I can't leave, and I just need to know if you can go and pick up some stuff for me tomorrow, and I'llâ€"I'll let you use my Minimum for something, okay?" She doesn't pause for a second, hurtles on. "They don't care about you like they care about me so I can help you find somewhere to go once you drop out of this shithole andâ€""

"Save it," says Murasaki. "I'll do that favour. But I don't need to leave."

Honey stares at him for so long he almost feels uncomfortable, then puts her bento box aside. She reaches into her pocket and drops a folded piece of paper next to him; Murasaki unfurls it and finds an address inside.

Plastic crumples and Honey pushes herself off the table.

"Fine," says Honey. "Let me know if you ever want a prediction. Don't be surprised when you realise how little you look like you want to be here."

Murasaki doesn't manage to reply.

* * *

><p>Leaving his number works. A student has been missing and his best friend is the one to report it to Art directly. There's something about how she stumbles over every syllable that suggests she's never come forward about her concerns, and every word ushers with it a faint echo that has Art wonder if she's calling from one of the bathrooms, but Art doesn't ask about either.</p>

Art calms her, talks to her, takes notes, and reassures her that what she's doing is the best thing to do.

"Thank you, Rei," says Art. "You've really helped."

"That's okay." Rei blows her nose, which carries through the speaker like a muffled horn. "Can I... can I ask a favour, Mr. Art?"

"A favour?"

"Can you make sure he's alright somehow? I don't know if you are from that police division but can... can you somehow..."

"I'll keep in contact and forward any information on that I can," Art promises.

Rei thanks him and begins listing locations. Art jots them down, takes a moment to catch Gasquet's eye and mouth Call Rune, and tries to quash how his chest flutters with anticipation.

"Can you run a search?" Art tells Rune once his call with Rei has ended. "Look for any references to someone called 'Theo'."

Ten minutes, many filenames, and many megabytes later, photos and website snapshots begin downloading.

Art stops on a diary extract:

Theo said he probably would have jumped if it weren't for me. What wonderful deeds I've done for him, wonderful deeds. So desperate and so delightful. What face will he make if I tell him I may have to leave?

Art's phone almost drops with his stomach, and he jerks as if he can find a boy he does not know.

* * *

><p>TBC/**

* * *

><p>((leave your thoughts if you're still here? laughs quietly
it's been a year))

End
file.